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RANCH ROMANCES

A THRILLING PUBLICATION
FIRST MARCH NUMBER

FEATURING

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by Duncan Macdonald

Beginning

THE DRIFTERS
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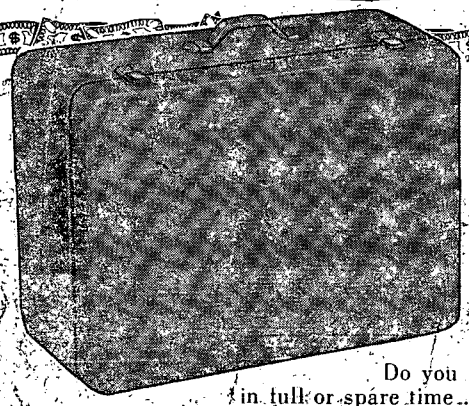

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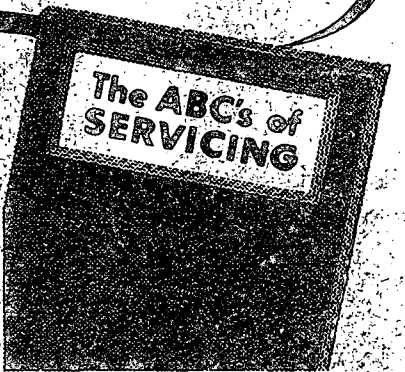

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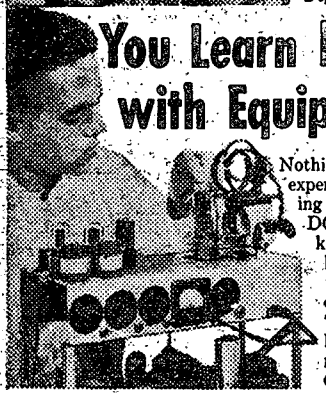

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32nd Year
OF PUBLICATION

FIRST MARCH NUMBER
February 24, 1956
Volume 196, No. 4

RANCH ROMANCES

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HELEN TONO
Editor

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Farmerette

Dear Editor:

This is my second try at getting pen pals, and I hope I make it this time. I promise to answer all letters, and will exchange snapshots. I am 18 years old, 5'7" tall, and weigh 125 lbs. I have black hair and blue eyes. I live on a farm and I love to go to square dances.

ARLENE AGNEW

Box 304
Zeliensple, Pa.

Canadian Companion

Dear Editor:

I was glad to read a copy of RANCH ROMANCES again. I'd like pen pals of either sex, principally those who are fond of music, writing or horses. I have lived in Canada most of my life, but have spent five years in California and the state of Washington. I would especially like to hear from Vallejo and Tacoma.

HARRY HAMILTON

124 Citen Road
Toronto, Canada

Part of a Singing Group

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of fifteen who would love to write to people between the ages of 15 and 19. I love hillbilly and Western music, and belong to a singing group in my community called The Four Aces. I also love to roller skate and swim. I have long brown curly hair, hazel eyes, and am 5'7" tall, and weigh 126 lbs.

YVONNE FISHER

R.R. 1 Milton
Wisconsin

All-round Junior

Dear Editor:

I am a 17 year old girl and a junior in high school. I am about 5'4" tall and have dark brown hair and eyes. I'm very much interested in sports of all kinds. I'm fond of horses and dogs. I'd like to write to anyone between the ages of 16 and 25. Thank you.

MARION HAVSON

Round Lake, Minnesota

From Far-Off Japan

Dear Editor:

I'm hoping there is room in your column for a lonely G.I. I am stationed over here in Japan. My hobbies are football, track and hillbilly music. I am 20 years old, 5'11" tall, 160 lbs. and have blond hair and blue eyes. I will answer all letters.

NOLEN PENFRO

483DMTR SY BOX 186
APO 75 San Francisco, Calif.

Widow On A Farm

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonely farm woman and I hope you will print my letter. I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for years, and have come to think of it as a good neighbor who pays me a visit. I am 55 years old. I like farm life and would enjoy hearing from men near my own age who have had a farming background. I have been a widow for 6 years and have one boy age 18. I will gladly exchange snapshots.

BELL GIRNTER

General Delivery
Liberty, Texas

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Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Curious About Other Places

Dear Editor:

I would very much like to hear from people in other places in order to get an idea of what other places are like. I am 21 years old, 4'11", brown hair, green eyes. My interests are reading, music and movies.

DOLORES ALBRECHT

90 St. Mary's Hospital
Conrad, Montana

Will Tell All

Dear Editor:

I write this hoping that it will find its way into "Our Air Mail." I am 17 years old. I am a Philippine boy and stand 5'3" tall. I am fond of writing letters, collecting stamps and traveling. I will tell whoever writes me all about our beautiful country. Thank you.

HERMAN D. JOLO

11 Rizal St.
Himamaylan, Negros Occidental
Philippine Islands

From Jamaica Way

Dear Editor:

Please publish my name in your Air Mail of RANCH ROMANCES. I am 15 years old and would like to have some pen pals. I promise to write and tell about my life here.

PATRICK ROBINSON

49 Deanery Rd.
Vineyard Twin.,
Kingston, Jamaica, B.W.I.

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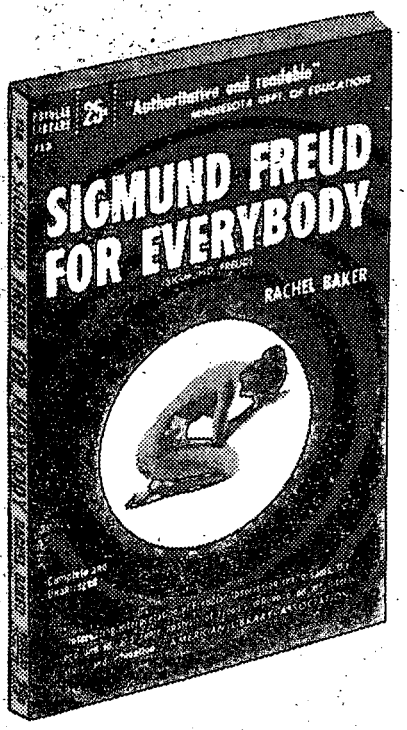

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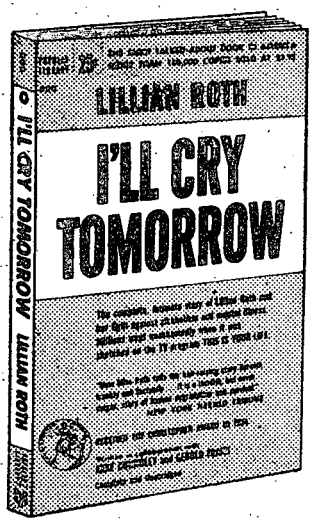

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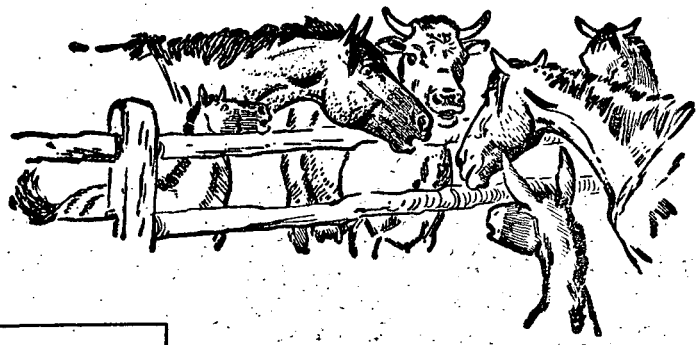
TRAIL DUST



PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

THERE'S a new python in the Dallas, Tex., zoo, which has been christened "Pat" because the name will fit either a male or a female. Seems that no one, even the zoo director, wants to get close enough to find out whether it's a girl or a boy snake.

SAGINAW, Mich., parents have been urged to teach their children to call the police in case of trouble. One four-year-old took the advice to heart, and called a cop to complain about his baby-sitter—whose crime was that she had made him go to bed.

AFRAID his friends might see him, a prisoner in the Sterling, Colo., jail objected strenuously to working in the city parks. He readily accepted an alternate assignment—a caretaking job in a cemetery.

MOTHERS just can't win sometimes, according to a lady in Omaha, Neb., whose twin daughters, riding in a car with her, threw their new shoes out the window. The harried mother backtracked, but found only two shoes—both for the right foot.

TRYING to talk two women out of a fight in a bar, a Dallas, Tex., man got a pistol and fired into the ceiling. It broke up the fight, but a piece of the ceiling fell on the would-be peacemaker, seriously injuring him.

LOS ANGELES, Calif., police hastily canceled an order for "2,000 pounds of beer" for city jail inmates, and explained it was all a typographical error. It should have read "beef."

THERE'S no chance of misunderstanding the meaning of a sign posted on a piece of private property in Bassett, Neb. It reads:

"No neckin'.
"No drinkin'.
"No trespassin'.
"No foolin'—
"STAY OUT!"

WHEN the stranger came into a Pierre, S. D., cafe and ordered four dozen soft-boiled eggs and one cup of coffee, the skeptical owner suggested the cook start with a dozen eggs. The customer polished them off, demanded the rest of the order, and, while the owner watched in astonishment, ate the other three dozen eggs and washed them down with his one cup of coffee.

A COURTESY campaign was on in a Des Moines, Ia., grocery store, and the clerk didn't bat an eye when a customer asked for a can opener. When the customer opened a can of soup, drank it, and paid for it, the clerk even disposed of the empty can.

WOULD-BE burglars failed to break into a safe in an Iowa City, Ia., plant, and the owner is sorry. He said the safe had jammed while it was being moved, and it isn't any use to him anyway unless it can be opened.

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RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

THE SPOILERS

Universal remakes a classic thriller of the old gold rush days, and it's even more exciting in this new Technicolor version

YOU HAVE to have a long memory to recall the original version of *The Spoilers*, but if you were a movie-goer way back in 1914, the chances are you'll never forget that nine-reel epic which made movie history.

Universal has just made a new version of this tale of Alaskan gold rush days, and by any standards the new one has the old one beat all hollow—modern movie techniques like sound and color photography having been invented since 1914. But Universal doesn't expect the new version with all its trimmings to make as much impression on the public as the old one did. For many Americans, *The Spoilers* was the first movie they ever saw.

The three stars of the modern *Spoilers* are glad they don't have to compete with the old stars. Anne Baxter, for instance, wouldn't be caught dead in the costumes that silent star Kathlyn Williams wore.

"She looked like a trussed-up burlap bag," Anne said. "But my wardrobe is all pink-and-black and just a bit revealing. It's tight where it should be tight, with flounces everywhere else. In the movie I'm supposed to knock those Alaskan sourdoughs for a loop. I'm sort of a hand grenade with ruffles."

The two male stars, Jeff Chandler and Rory Calhoun, had an even better reason for not wanting history to repeat itself, because the fist fight between the hero and the villain in the first version was really the roughest ever filmed. It was so violent that William Farnum and Tom Santschi actually ended up in the hospital.

William Farnum used to talk about it for years afterward. "Tom struck the first blow, and by heaven he broke my nose! I thought he'd hurt me on purpose, so I waited for an opening. Then I let him have it, as hard as I could. He came back with a punch over the left eye and I spurted blood like a stuck pig."

From all over the lot a crowd had gathered, and everyone could see that the fight was in earnest. People yelled, "Stop them! They're killing each other!"

"We smashed a bookcase," Farnum recalled. "I found myself inside it, with Tom coming in after me. And then it went over. It should have killed us both. At the end I

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got a good shoulder lock on Tom. I bent him back until I heard him groan. At last I had sense enough to let go."

Farnum would conclude his story by saying, "Dear old Tom. We got to be great friends afterward."

It was quite a long time afterward, though, before they made up—just about as long as it took to heal a broken nose, several crushed ribs and assorted contusions.

Jeff and Rory wanted no part of a fracas like that one. They were glad when the director mapped out the battle strategy for them in advance. Every step in it was planned so that the effect would be realistic and yet no one would get hurt.

Just about the only thing that hasn't been changed in this remake of *The Spoilers* is the story. It's just as exciting today as it was in 1914—though perhaps a little more familiar—to see a handsome miner and a glamorous dancehall girl foil a plot to steal the claims of the small prospectors.

Jeff plays an honest mine owner, and Rory is a rascal who uses his official position as Gold Commissioner to cover up his scheme to defraud the sourdoughs.

Anne is the shady dame with the heart of gold, and it's the kind of part she especially relishes, having spent most of her career, so far, in more ladylike roles.

"It didn't matter whether I played heroines or villainesses," Anne complained, "I was always genteel."

Genteel is hardly the word for her in this picture. She makes one spectacular entrance sliding down a bannister. In some scenes she wears a jeweled garter, and all through the movie she wears a fetching curl in front of her ear.

"At the turn of the century," Anne told me, "one ringlet hanging there was called a kiss curl, and it meant just what you'd think—that the lady was receptive."

Rory told me that he hoped Anne's coiffure would start a new fad, but Jeff disagreed.

"Personally," he said, grinning, "I think it would be very hard on married men like you and me to see girls walking down the street, wearing an invitation to be kissed."

Jeff Chandler's attentions disturb gambling lady Anne Baxter

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CAMERON MITCHELL
Minister's Son

RANCH FLICKER TALK

WHEN Cameron Mitchell, aged 18, informed his parents that he wanted to become an actor, his father threatened to disown him. It was not an ordinary case of parental disapproval of the glittering life behind the footlights, because Cam's father was a minister, and so was *his* father, grandfather, and great-grandfather.

But Cameron was determined to go to New York and get into the theater, with or without his father's consent. With or without cash, however, was a more serious story to his sympathetic high school principal, who wrestled with her conscience for a while, and finally lent him $250 with no more security than his enthusiasm.

It was a long time before this trusting lady got her money back. In New York, Cam decided to storm the theater by mail. He wrote letters to everyone connected with the stage—producers, playwrights, directors, even actors. No one answered.

He settled down to keeping body and soul together by working in a hamburger joint, a mail order house and at Radio City as a sight-seeing guide. Then, long after he'd given up letter writing as job-getting strategy, he wrote one more.

He had just seen Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne in their famous movie *The Guardsman*. Critics and movie fans acclaimed Lunt's performance. Everyone thought he was great—except Cameron Mitchell. So he wrote one more letter, the gist of which was that Cameron Mitchell could act rings around Alfred Lunt.

Cam thought he was just letting off steam, but that letter got a reply from Lunt's secretary, who arranged an appointment. Cam got a severe scolding for his rudeness, but he also got a chance to read for the Lunts, and a few weeks later he was playing in Shakespeare on Broadway. After a year there he went on tour with the Lunts for two years.

Today Cameron wouldn't recommend writing a critical letter to a big star if you want a job from him. "I'm really ashamed of having been so brash," he said, "except for the fact that it worked."

The next big break came along five years later, after two years in the Air Force and three at MGM. Cam's contract hadn't been renewed, and he was spending a restless winter with his wife's parents in Canada.

"Then I got a copy of *Death of A Salesman* through the mail. That warmed me up like an oil burner. It was 30 below outside and the roads were drifted with snow, but I got into the car and drove straight to New York, determined to get a part in the show."

P. S. He got it. He played the salesman's younger son for two years in the stage version and then went to Columbia to play the same role in the movies.

His movie career hasn't been interrupted since, and now he says he doesn't want to go back to Broadway again. Having three sons, aged 11, 6 and 4, he enjoys the home life he can have in Hollywood. He likes the climate, too, and plays tennis and softball the year round.

Cam is now under a long-term contract to 20th Century-Fox, and it's brought him a wide variety of parts. His first role for Fox was the brutal gunslinger in *Outcasts of Poker Flats*, and his latest is another Western, *The Tall Men*.

"I was determined to prove to my family that being an actor wouldn't send me straight to the dogs," he explains laughingly.

Finally Cam did manage to overcome his family's prejudice. "The first movie my mother ever saw was one of mine," he said. "Believe me, that was a great day for both of us."

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20th Century-Fox

Cam had to prove to his family that being an actor was worthwhile

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FEARFUL

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JOURNEY

by DUNCAN MACDONALD

WOUNDED NEAL BRANSOM had lost his memory. All he knew was that men were hunting him down . . . and a siren called Lorelei needed him

EVENING sifted down from the ridges, killing the wind. The air was scorched and motionless, the sky a fiery blue, and around the shack on the bluff, dust that had whirled all afternoon lay still as summer heat. But dust like a wounded snake crawled on the red trail from Tres Caballos. The varment trapper for the ranches around the Agua Caliente watched it.

His corrugated iron shack with its pounded dirt floor and single, burlap-covered window was less than fifty miles from the border. Sometimes men fleeing to Mexico would stop and demand a fresh horse, or food and shelter. Arizona was still a territory, and had its share of wanted men.

But the trapper owned a double-barreled shotgun, and his thin,

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tight mouth wasn't used much for talking. Until now, no fugitive had stepped inside the shack. Until now, he'd never dreamed of allowing such a thing. The country had its troubles, and a man did well to stay out of them.

Now he stood undecided, watching dust on a far hill grow from flung-out lariat shape to a rippling scarf. So it wasn't a dust devil he was looking at, and it was high time to make up his mind.

Well, it's no skin off my nose, he decided at last, and strode to the brush corral to saddle the roan mare that drooped, head down, in a corner. That was a favorite expression of his, and covered, he had found, almost every situation. He led the mare to the shack, and tied the reins to the ring on the door hasp. Then he went inside.

The heat of the day still lingered like an evil memory in iron walls and roof. It beat down upon his head, his skull seemed too thin against it. The thought of lying, wounded, under it all afternoon almost made him sick; but he forced himself to think of nothing, to walk without haste to the rawhide-sprung cot. He bent over.

His first reaction was relief. The lad's dead, he told himself. Then he saw pink-tinged froth on the lips tremble with shallow breathing, and was ashamed of what he had felt. This was a young fellow, in his early twenties perhaps, sturdily built, and tall enough so that his dusty boots hung over the end of the cot. His sun-bleached brown hair was dark against the pallor of his face; there was a crude bandage rusty with blood on his left shoulder. At least the bleeding had stopped.

The trapper got down whisky from the shelf above the stove, uncorked the bottle, and drank deeply. Then he went back to the cot and shook the boy's uninjured shoulder, gently at first, than furiously. The boy's lips drew back from his teeth in a piercing cry.

Prickles stood up on the trapper's neck, but he went on shaking. The boy opened his eyes. They were deep blue, the pupils were black, and they weren't focusing. They were looking beyond, at nothingness.

The trapper said loudly, "Somebody's coming after you, young 'un."

The blue eyes abruptly focused. "Who?"

"Here, drink this. It'll stiffen you up." The trapper lifted the boy's head and forced the mouth of the whisky bottle between his bloodless lips. The boy drank, sputtered, and coughed. His lips lost some of their pallor.

"Who'scomingafterme?" His words were blurred together.

"Damn it, how would I know? You fall off your horse near here, and I picked you up, bandaged your shoulder. That's all I know. What did you do to set them after you?"

The boy was silent for a moment, frowning. "I can't remember."

"The hell you can't. Who shot you?"

He shook his head.

"For heaven's sake, boy, think! Who shot you, where'd it happen?"

"I'm trying, Mister. It just won't come."

The boy was telling the truth; the trapper saw it on the pale, frightened face. But that didn't make him feel any better. He slammed the whisky bottle back on the shelf.

"You have maybe an hour's start, and by then it'll be dark. You'll be safe enough."

"You aren't making me get out of here, are you, Mister? You couldn't."

"What do you think?"

"But I—I can't sit a horse."

"Who cares? There are six, seven men coming. What do you expect me to do?"

The boy's eyes were wide, and there was a hint of panic in them. "You could hide me. You could tell them—"

"And what would happen to me after they found out I'd lied? You kids are all alike. You think of nobody but yourselves."

The trapper filled a canteen from the water olla that hung suspended by a wagon chain from the ceiling. Kids, he thought, they got themselves into trouble and expected someone else to get them out of it.

"Easy, now," he said more kindly. "Tie this onto your belt. Then if you fall off your horse again, at least you've got that."

THE trapper bent over and did the tying himself. Maybe I can guess what happened to you. And I don't want any part of it."

"What?"

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"Never mind now. Just listen to me. There are two things you can do: you can ride to the border, or you can head for the Tollingers. I'd say the Tollingers. They're nearer."

"Why them?"

The trapper stared at him. "You're riding a horse with the Tollinger brand, that's why. Didn't you know?"

The boy shook his head.

"Your pistol must have jounced out on the way here. I figured you for a Tollinger gunhand."

"Do you think I'm a gunhand?"

"You don't look like one, come to think of it. Are you?"

"I might be. I just can't remember." Again, a furrow of concentration creased his forehead.

"You don't have to be so blamed honest about it," the trapper said gruffly. "Come on, let's get you started."

He put his arm under the boy's shoulder and lifted. The boy sank his teeth in his lower lip, but he set up. He put first one foot down on the floor, then the other. Leaning his weight on the trapper, he stood up, swaying.

"Is isn't far to your horse, just a few steps."

But the mare skittered sideways when the boy tried to mount. "Steady, you damned slut!" the trapper said. After a half-dozen tries, he managed to heave the youngster into the saddle, where he sat slumped far forward, clutching the horn.

"You'll make it all right," the trapper assured him. "If somebody should ask, you won't remember stopping here, will you?"

"Don't worry," the boy said shortly. "Would you tell me something?"

"Sure."

"What's my name?"

"Don't you know?" The trapper looked at him shrewdly and thought, he won't last the night. "Neal Bransom was the name you gave when I dragged you into the shack. Outside of that, I don't know anything about you."

"Neal Bransom," the boy repeated, as if he were trying to memorize it.

"The Tollinger ranch is on the Agua Caliente. It's only sixteen miles from here. Just follow this trail until it begins to climb that high-humped ridge over there. Then turn west, and in about a mile you'll be at the Tollinger place."

The dying sun was red on the dust behind them. The trapper glanced over his shoulder at it, then said, "Well, good luck," and gave the mare a smart slap on the rump.

Neal Bransom felt pain grind up through his body as the mare lunged ahead. When the pain struck his shoulder, he shut his eyes tight against it, and that was a mistake. Opening them, he found he had fallen forward against the horse's neck, and it was all he could do to pull himself into a half-slumping position again. He resolved to keep his eyes open after that.

The shack was set on a bluff, but not on the top. The trail wound in switchbacks, and once, without turning his head, Neal could see the dust. It pointed a hooked finger at him, and that made him want to go faster, to set the mare at a run, to get away from that dust, get to where it would be safe to think.

It was all faintly unreal, to be running, to have a black hiatus in time where memory ought to be. But the hurt in his shoulder was real enough, and so was the dust. You didn't get shot, or have men chasing you, for nothing, did you? Later, there'd be time to think about the why of it.

Still, when he saw the shack again in another turn of the trail, memory pushed at him. There was unfinished business back there, something, he had been trying to say all the while the old fellow had been brusquely getting rid of him. Something important. It had tumbled around in his mind, never clear enough to sort out from the helter-skelter of his thoughts.

Now it came to him, like the twisting of a nerve, and the sweet-bitter pain of it was almost more than he could bear. The swiftly-bending grasses as they rustled under the horse's hoofs seemed to whisper it—*Lorelei! Lorelei!*

It wasn't her real name. That was something plain and ordinary, like Jane or Mary. Once, he had laughed and said that in her spare time she sat upon a rock on the Rhine and lured sailors to destruction. And she had laughed and said she hadn't thought he would learn her secret so easily. Her hair

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was bright as autumn when aspens were blowing upon the hills, when the mist—about the color of her eyes—was gray in the hollows. No one but he called her Lorelei; only he and she knew about it.

BUT the old man would know her. Anyone would know who she was. Neal would go back and ask, because he needed her now, even worse than the other lonesome times. He tried to turn his head—the shack was behind him, but it couldn't be far—and almost fell from the saddle. Then, when he recovered from that, he found he couldn't lift the reins. Too late, he thought, too late for mending.

He sank into lethargy after that, in which small sounds came to him sharply—quail calling each other together for the night from their far-flung feeding places under the brush, the clink and rattle of stones, and, much later, a nighthawk's bubbling call. It was dark.

He was panic-stricken, thinking he was dying. Then he saw ridges and hills etched against the pale night sky. There was no motion now, and hardly any pain. The mare was cropping the sweet, damp grasses.

Very carefully, Neal Bransom unscrewed the cap of the canteen tied to his waist, raised the metal flask to his lips, and drank. His throat had been burning with thirst, and the night sky whirled before his upturned eyes. But when he lowered the canteen at last, he felt better. His head was clearer, too. He began to make plans.

There was no use trying to get back to the old man. He wouldn't know in which direction the shack lay. The horse had followed a trail, but perhaps not the same trail they had started on. There was a high ridge before him. There had been other ridges, too, Neal remembered, besides the ridge the old man had pointed out to him. There was no one behind him, though, at least not close.

He'd have to find his way somehow to the Tollinger place. Yet the task would be simpler if he could remember who he was, what had happened to him. He shut his eyes, then recalled how that had nearly caused disaster, and quickly opened them. But this time, he kept his balance.

NEAL BRANSOM

LORELEI

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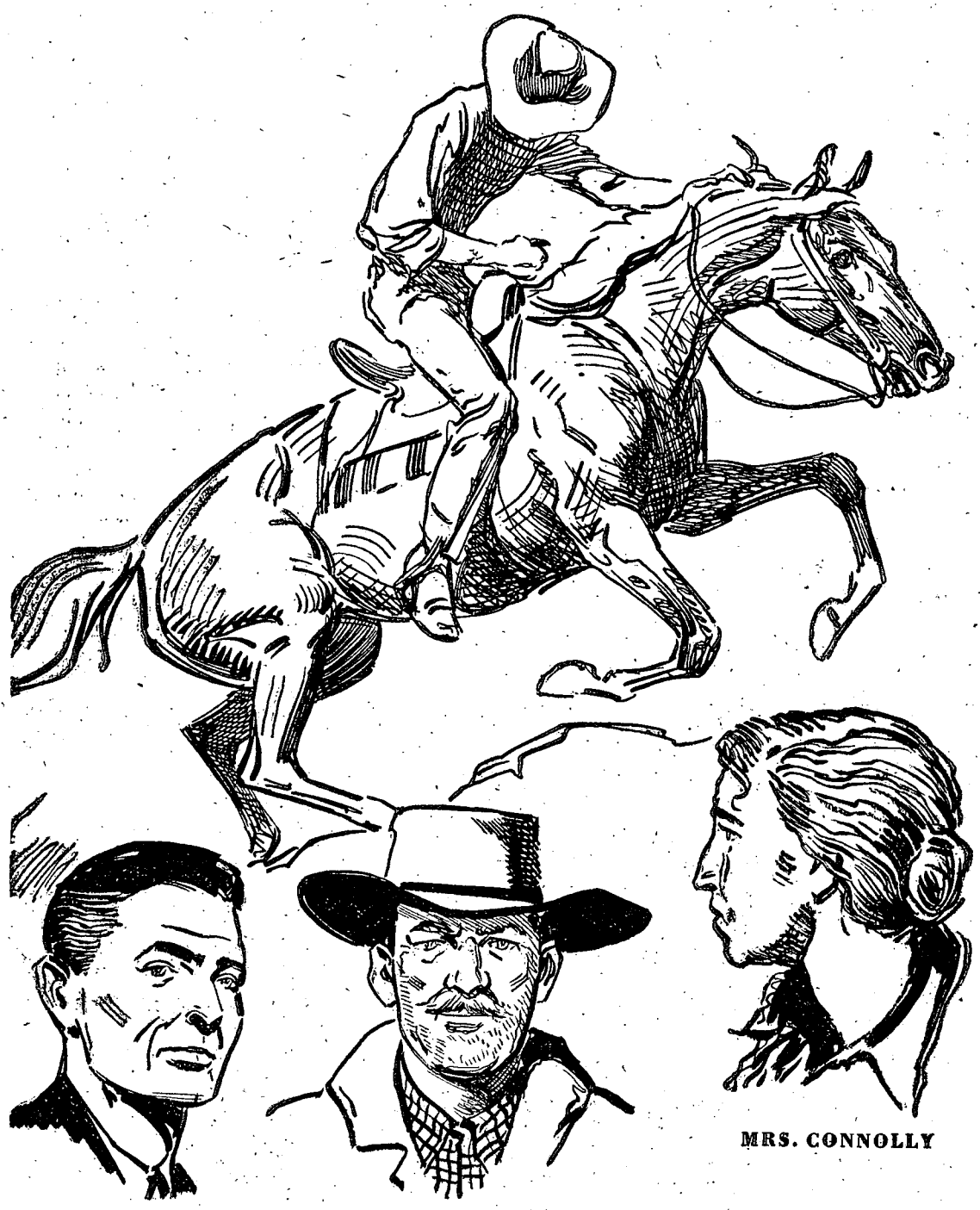

CRESWICKE

CHRISTIAN TOLLINGER

MRS. CONNOLLY

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It was hard trying to remember. The more he sought them, the more swiftly his thoughts fled from him. He could remember Lorelei. He had his own name, too, though that meant nothing to him—Neal Bransom. He repeated it several times, so that he wouldn't forget it. Then he touched his heels to the mare's flanks, and set his teeth against the pain of motion.

The night was long. Sometimes Neal held himself stiffly erect in the saddle. Sometimes, hardly knowing how it happened, he would slump forward, and once he awoke to find he was hanging head downward, only his feet in the stirrups keeping him from falling. After that, he got out rawhide tug from the saddlebag and laboriously tied himself to the saddle. He looked around.

There were ridges, but they were no longer in the right direction, and Neal was sure now he had lost the trail. The best thing would be to stop and wait for daylight, but he was afraid of that. If he got off this horse, he'd never be able to get back on again. So he'd have to keep going. The horse, being a Tollinger animal, might find its own way back to home range. He hoped so.

Then once, when consciousness was clear and hard upon him, when pain burned a bright fire in his body, still not consuming consciousness, he found no more room in himself for hope. He wanted to die. He wanted to fall off the horse and die. But the rawhide thongs held him. If he could reach them and tear them off, he would let himself fall. But perhaps even that effort was unnecessary. Perhaps he could will himself to die. Indians could do that, he had heard.

There was a thrumming way back in his head, and it kept time with the pace of the horse. Lorelei, it seemed to say. She needed him as much as he needed her. So he would stay alive until he found her.

THE woman was drawing water from the well. Her bony elbows stood stiffly erect, the faded cotton dress hung loosely from the slumped curve of her chest as she bent over and hauled on the rope. When the bucket reached the lip of the well, she drew it forward and let it rest there, brushing at a strand of ropy hair with dry, chapped hands. She didn't turn around, although she must have heard the horse coming.

"Ma'm, could you—" Neal Bransom's voice sounded weak and strange in his ears. He held the canteen out to her.

She turned then. Her glance fled before his, like a frightened mouse, but Neal had seen the gray of her eyes. His heart beat furiously. Dawn was touching the ridges, but the ranchyard still slept in shadow, with here and there the late crowing of roosters, and over by the barn a deep mire in which a pig snuffled for scraps.

"I'll fill your canteen," the woman said, taking it. "But I ought to tell you my man will be back directly. He doesn't like strangers hanging around."

"You wouldn't be Mrs. Tollinger, would you?" He didn't think so, even before she whirled around at him.

"What ever give you such an idea?"

"I was headed for there. I lost my way. Is it far?"

Her head bobbed for answer.

"How far?"

"A right smart piece," she said, handing him the canteen. "You wouldn't get there before noon. Maybe later, the state your horse is in." She kept her face averted from his.

Neal's heart sank. He swallowed, and said, "Ma'm, if I could have breakfast, and maybe rest a while—"

"I'd have to ask my man when he gets back." Then she saw the rawhide thongs tying his thighs to the saddle, and her startled glance flew upward. "You're hurt!" Her eyes were soft and kind.

He blurted it out then. "Ma'm, do you have any daughters?"

"No daughters. No sons." Her hand crept over her flat chest.

"Do you know a girl—"

"Don't know anybody. There's just my man and me here. We don't go visiting."

"Will your husband be back soon?"

Her head bobbed again, then swung sideways as she peered at the barn, at the broken-down tumble of corral fence. "Never mind about him," she said quickly. "You come on."

"You'd have to help me."

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"I'm strong enough. Just you wait." She began untying the rawhide thongs. "My name's Mrs. Connolly. Amos is my man's name." As she talked, she led the horse through the refuse-littered yard to the kitchen doorway. "We don't see anybody from one month to the next. It gets mightly lonesome, I can tell you. You new hereabouts?"

Neal hardly knew how to answer that. "I can't remember."

"I took you for a Tollinger at first, with that horse. There's old Christian Tollinger and his three boys, but I never saw them up real close. Their stock drifts in here, though. They're mighty free and easy about ranging their stock. Mr. Connelly, he's been fixing to have it out with them about it." She thrust a stick between the loose boards of the house, and tied the horse to it. "Just ease down slow. It won't pay to be in a hurry."

The kitchen table stood near the doorway. Neal was grateful for that as he sank, gasping, into the chair Mrs. Connolly pulled out for him. As he caught his breath and gazed around, he was astonished at what he saw. The kitchen was as poverty stricken as the ranchyard, but spotless. The unpainted wood of the floor was worn smooth with many scrubbings, and so was the table at which he sat.

Mrs. Connolly said, "It's funny you should ask. I never had any children. Wish I had."

Having confided in him in a burst of garrulousness, she was now shyly silent. She put side meat to fry in the iron skillet, then poured water from the kettle into a basin and began washing his face. He smiled at her, feeling immensely better. For the first time his situation seemed less than desperate.

He said, "I should have told you my name before. It's Neal Bransom."

"Oh," she said. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Bransom. That's mighty terrible looking, what you got in your shoulder. It isn't bullet hole, is it?"

"Yes."

Her glance skittered to him, and then away. "I'll see what I can do for it. And if it's all the same to you, Mr. Bransom, we won't mention it to Mr. Connolly when he comes."

She soaked the blood-stuck bandage with warm water, then with gentle fingers removed it and swabbed the wound. "I'm trying not to hurt you, Mr. Bransom."

"It's all right," he mumbled. Sweat stood out on his face.

"You ought to have a doctor," she said. "Maybe when Mr. Connolly comes, he'll see his way to let you stay here while he sends for one. I can't say for sure."

"I understand," Neal said.

"It looks like the bullet went clean through, but there are always bits of cloth and such that'll poison the wound, if you don't get them out."

She fetched clean rags and bandaged his shoulder. "I wouldn't be surprised, too, but what you lost a heap of blood. If you weren't young and strong, you wouldn't have ridden this far."

SHE thrust her spoon through the light crust of molasses in the bean pot and filled a dish for him, then poured out coffee. It was strong and good. Neal hadn't thought he could eat, but when his plate was heaped with beans and side meat and light, high biscuits, he ate ravenously.

Mrs. Connolly sat down in the chair opposite and watched him with a shy, pleased smile. She said, "It isn't that I want to pry, but I was wondering how you came by that bullet wound."

This was the question Neal had been dreading. Looking at Mrs. Connolly, he was sure that if she thought he was lying, she would be turned against him, might refuse to help him further.

He said very carefully, "I don't know how else to say this, ma'am. I just don't remember how it happened, nor anything about myself before I was shot."

For a moment, he thought she hadn't believed him. Then she said, "I can see how that would be. I had an uncle once got a ball in his leg at Shiloh, and the surgeons cut it off at the knee. His woman had to go fetch him home, because he didn't remember anything—not her, nor his children."

"Didn't it ever come back to him?"

"Next year it did, when he was at a turkey shoot and somebody shot off a musket right

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by his ear. He remembered then, all about getting that ball in his knee, and him lying on the field all day, and men screeching and dying all around him."

"Was he all right after that?"

"Just the same as he'd always been. He took to liquoring and beating up folks again. I reckon it'd been better if he hadn't remembered. Here, Mr. Bransom, you ought to have more on your plate."

She filled it up. "I guess, then, you wouldn't know anything about the Tollinger feud."

"Feud?"

"Three men killed so far, besides a passel of 'em wounded, and no end to it yet."

"Do you think—"

She eyed him closely. "That's just what I think, that you've got yourself mixed up in it. Want to hear?"

"Yes."

"It's a fearful story. Revel Tollinger—that's the youngest boy—killed Wyatt Gantrie in a gunfight four months ago. Rev was just turned eighteen, and Wyatt was a year younger. All the Tollingers have tempers like he-bears, and Rev is the worst of the lot.

"Old Luther Gantrie wanted to settle it peacefully. He held his boys in, even after the jury set Rev free. Then Rev got to boasting in the saloons. He couldn't keep his mouth shut, and old Christian Tollinger can see no wrong in his boy. Rev's his favorite. Wasn't more'n a month after the trial before the Tollingers and Gantries were shooting each other on sight. Both sides hired gunhands, and if either of 'em had a notion of right and wrong, they've forgotten it now. Does what I say bring anything back to you?"

Neal shook his head.

"With you riding a Tollinger horse, I'd say you belonged with them, and maybe got shot by a Gantrie gunhand. You ought to get to the Tollingers as fast as you can. They'll see you're taken good care of. More coffee?"

"Thanks."

She got up and fetched the coffee pot. "If Mr. Connolly is so inclined, it might be he'll ride to the Tollingers and tell them about you. That's him now," she whispered suddenly.

Neal heard a step outside, a pause, and a muffled curse. Then the latch flew up. Amos Connolly came in, shutting the door by leaning his heavy shoulders against it, while his glance took in the murky depths of the kitchen. Broken fingernails scraped over spikes of black beard on his chin.

"I have some hot coffee for you, Amos, if you'll just sit down. This is—"

He didn't look at her. "You made yourself right at home, didn't you? And you, woman, you let him in!"

"He's hurt, Amos. Can't you see that?"

"Hurt, is he? How'd he get hurt?"

"Fell off his horse," she mumbled. "Fell off and broke his shoulder."

His eyes went back to Neal. "What are you doing here?"

"I can pay," Neal said in a strained voice. "I've got money."

"You aren't going to let him pay, are you, Amos?"

"Shut your mouth, woman! I asked what you were doing here."

"He doesn't remember anything, Amos, after he fell off his horse."

Amos Connolly swung around at her. "Will you shut your mouth?"

"If you'll get word to the Tollingers that I'm here, and have them come fetch me," Neal said, "I'll gladly pay you whatever you think it's worth."

"And have the Gantries on my neck for keeping you? I have troubles enough already. Just you git, and we'll call it square."

Neal stood up, leaning on the table for support.

"He can't walk, Amos."

"Then help him, damn you! Get him out of here. And by heaven, if I ever hear he let on he stopped here—" He held the door open for them.

By leaning against the wall of the house while Mrs. Connolly steadied the horse, Neal managed to heave himself into the saddle. "I'm obliged to you, ma'am," he said softly.

"Never you mind," she said in a small, tight voice. "Here, take this." She thrust a rag-wrapped package into his hands. From its warmth, he guessed it contained biscuits. "Follow this trail until you come to the branching, then take the left fork, and it'll

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bring you to the main wagon road. The Tollinger ranch is off that, toward town. Just watch for a big rock with their brand cut into it."

"I'm obliged," Neal said again, but she had turned, and her bony, poverty-stricken figure disappeared into the house.

THEY were close upon him, Neal didn't know how close, he didn't even know who "they" were. He was high among the rocks, and the gray lizards scuttled on ahead of him, and the heat danced off red sandstone, striking up at his eyes. The sun bored through the thin bone of his skull like a dull-glowing poker; his shirt, heavy with sweat, chafed at his armpits.

Each time the mare gathered her hind legs under her belly for an upward lunge, she seemed to falter, to have hardly enough strength to lift herself and her burden. The pass looked no nearer than it had half an hour ago. But the men were close.

He couldn't see them. They were down among the twisted juniper and oak thickets. Once he had sighted their dust, but that had been a long time ago. It had hung motionless at first. Then, kicked high by inner convulsions, it had boiled in a fat, ugly cloud. He hadn't seen a sign of them since.

He felt the mare's great heart hammer against his legs. He should be walking, leading her. But he couldn't walk. *They,* he thought. He was being hunted down, and he didn't know by whom. He cursed them until his fever and sun dried lips cracked. He drew his tongue over his lips, and tasted salt, and felt blood trickle down. His canteen was empty again.

Back there, after he had crossed Connolly's ranchyard and picked up the trail where it dipped below the barn, he had done something foolish—or maybe just ludicrous. He had tried to find out whether or not he was a gunhand. In the faded duck of his trouser leg, below the empty holster, he had looked for a dark stripe of unfaded cloth which a rawhide thong might have left. But there was no unfaded cloth, and so there never had been a tied-down holster.

He had tried drawing an imaginary revolver to see how fast he was. He wasn't fast. The wound slowed him down.

His saddlebag had yielded nothing but pigging strings, Mrs. Connolly's biscuits, and a cheap, rose-colored scarf, musky with perfume, flecked with white powder. There was nothing with his name on it, no letters, just that scarf that wasn't Lorelei's. It probably belonged to a dancehall girl. And so he might be a shabbier man than he cared to be. And so Mrs. Connolly might be right about its being better not to remember.

Yet he did remember, even now, with the pass ahead of him no closer, only the men closer. He couldn't remember whether he was a gunhand, nor whether he had ridden into a Gantrie ambush yesterday, nor who he was, nor what he was doing here, but he remembered Lorelei.

"Will you come if I need you?"

She bent to him, and her face was fretted with shadows. He saw the pale hollows in her forehead that the lamplight made, and her eyes very steady and gray, but glistening. He felt with his index finger the cleft above her full upper lip.

"You know I'll come." Her mouth was sweet and soft and yielding.

He remembered that.

A rifle cracked far below him, and cracked again, the echoes running together. The spent bullets fell to his right like dead leaves. The men were firing beyond range, and now he could see why.

He was at the pass. Behind him, the ridges fell away. Ahead, the trail swooped down to a distant twist of wagon road—his goal, the wagon road. Then after that the Tollinger ranch.

He felt high and naked and vulnerable up here. Yet the wagon road, with its more frequent passers-by, could be fraught with danger for a man who didn't know friend from foe. It might even be a trap. But he had no choice.

The wind pushed at him, and stones rattled, as he started downward. The mare braced her haunches, slid on forefeet, then ran a little, and slid again. The motion set his shoulder to pounding. He leaned over the horse's withers and retched, and had to clutch

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hard onto the saddlehorn, while the slope spun and swayed beneath him, and his eyeballs glazed as if scratched by sand.

But the men behind him would still have to make the laborious climb to the pass. So he had a little time. Then there was scree rock at the bottom of the slope, and a green meadow tall with grass, and beyond that, the bare, empty, wagon road. And no place to hide.

The men were far up the trail. They looked like dusty black ants back there. There were four of them, now bunched together, and seeming to push at each other in their haste, now trotting sedately single file.

They came on steadily. And there was only the bleak wagon road coasting over hills, concealing itself in low places, so that he couldn't know what lay on the other side. He crossed the meadow and grass slithered behind him. He didn't see the men any more. But there was an arroyo ahead that ran crookedly beside the road.

He plunged into it, and mesquite beat at his head, and raked along his jaws. The arroyo bought him a little more time. Not much, though, because they'd be good trackers, all of them. The mesquite clawed him, and he ducked his head. His shoulder was fiery hot.

He saw the heaps of bottles and rusting tin cans first, the molding refuse of years. Then he pulled the horse in, looked out at leafy sunshine, and saw the squat adobe building, blinding white beside the road. The sagging shutters were closed, but there were horses hitched out front.

He swung his right boot out of the stirrup, and it was very heavy; it wouldn't clear the cantle. He fell backward and lay supporting himself on one elbow, breathing hard. Through the ground, he seemed to feel the pound of horses. He got his knees under him, caught the reins, and tied them to a mesquite branch. Then he crawled out of the arroyo and headed for the adobe, white in the sun.

INSIDE, it smelled of old beer and slopped whisky. It smelled of sweat and dust and leather and tobacco smoke, and cow and man smell, and unwashed clothes and a leaking soapstone sink, and the free lunch of cheese and crackers, as if all these smells had been added upon year by year, and had ingrained themselves in dead wood, none of them ever leaving. The room was dim. Neal stood in the doorway, trying not to sway. Sickness rose coldly in his belly and clogged his throat.

Somebody said, "Shut that damned door!"

That was the owner, Neal guessed, a man sitting in the look-out chair against the wall, where he could see the gaming tables. He had eyes that could fasten themselves upon you, that bored into Neal like a probing thumb. Nobody else noticed him by more than a glance—none of the players, nor the men sitting in booths along the wall.

Neal shut the door. He put one foot out to test the floor, and it swayed a little, but he could walk. He could walk over to the owner, and say, "I want to use your back room for a while. I'll pay you." It surprised him that his voice was steady.

The man was enormous. He had many chins but no neck, and fat cascaded over the sides of the look-out chair. His eyes, bright and unwinking as a lizard's, didn't move from Neal's face. But he shook his head.

Neal said, "I can pay you well."

The nubbin of cigar that squatted in one corner of the owner's mouth traveled to the other side. "No."

Neal's tongue went dry. "I won't use it for long."

"You can try your hand at my games. You can drink my whisky. But I'm not hiding you."

"Not enough money, eh?"

Neal turned his head slowly, and saw that a tall man lounging against the bar had spoken. In spite of the heat, his flawless linen was impeccable under his heavy dark riding jacket, as if neither heat nor dust could touch him. He had a long, straight nose, and his upper lip smiled a little above white teeth. His eyes were pale blue, and very gay.

"Perhaps he has more money than you think. Why don't you ask him how much, Gruening?" His voice was bantering, with strong traces of accent.

The owner shrugged.

"You're a grubbing swine," said the Eng-

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llshman, without rancor. His eyes turned to Neal, looking him over coldly. "Gruening loves money. That's the only thing he respects, besides power, and you don't seem to have much of either. So you're in a tight corner."

Neal heard the clatter of horses outside, and sweat started in the palms of his hands. The Englishman tilted his head, listening, still smiling. "Where's your gun?"

"I lost it."

"Too bad." His humorous eyes went over Neal. "How long have you kept going with your shoulder like that?"

"Since yesterday morning."

The Englishman stared, then grunted. He walked over to Neal and touched him lightly on the arm. He was holding a whisky bottle by its neck, and he swung it, pointing toward a booth at the far end of the room. Neal followed him to the booth and sat down, his back toward the door. He was clumsy about it, but the Englishman didn't try to help him.

"Pull your hat down."

Neal slanted it over his face.

"Fine." The Englishman sat down beside him. He shoved the whisky bottle at Neal. Neal's stomach churned.

"Drink some. You may not get another chance."

The whisky had a hard, bitter taste in his mouth, but it stayed down. It didn't assuage his thirst.

"That's one place to find courage," said the Englishman.

Neal didn't think so. He didn't feel any braver than he had before. The sweat of fear crawled under his shirt, and he wasn't sure how his voice would behave, if he used it.

But the Englishman kept prodding at him with those bright, metallic eyes of his. "You're in a mess. What kind?"

"I don't know."

"Good. Don't tell any more than you have to." He raised the bottle and drank deeply. That sardonic smile, Neal decided, wasn't a smile at all. "Who's after you?"

"The Gantries, I think."

"So you hired yourself out to fight in a feud. They shot you, you lost your nerve and ran."

Neal felt himself flushing. It wasn't that way. No, damn it, it wasn't. "What did you expect me to—"

"Never mind. You're young, and it left you. I wouldn't bother with you if I didn't think you had it there somewhere. Do you want a gun?"

Neal swallowed against the tight constriction in his throat. "Yes."

"You're in no condition to use one."

"You'll find out whether I can."

The Englishman laughed, a sudden, explosive thing, and then as abruptly was coldly sober again. "Even a cornered mouse will fight. Self-preservation. But can you toss aside the instinct?"

"Will you give me a gun?"

"No." The Englishman's eye glinted. "That's what holds us down, you know, what causes wars, fear, yes, cruelty, even: the instinct for self-preservation. But every man has it in him to fight as if it weren't possible to die. It's born in him. You can't put it there. And you don't even know you have it." He looked toward the door. "You're an experiment."

"I am?"

"Pull your hat down."

NEAL heard the heavy tramping of boots and twisted around. The Englishman grabbed his arm. "Sit still!" He gave a low chuckle. "You said Gantries. It's Christian Tollinger and his three sons. He's a lumbering ox of a man, Tollinger, but extremely dangerous. Even his hair bristles—long white hair, and it stands on end."

Neal half rose from his seat. "They're friends of mine."

"Sit down, you fool!"

Neal couldn't see the men. He sat and listened, hardly breathing, to Christian Tollinger's voice. It was deep and querulous, and it seemed to come from a great distance.

"A man rode past here, or he came in. If he's here we want him."

The voice was big, it filled the room. Neal had never heard it before in his life. He was positive he hadn't.

"He was riding one of our horses," Christian Tollinger said. "Has anyone seen him?"

The room was silent.

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The Englishman whispered. "You see, they're all careful cowards."

"Is that the one who held up the Wells Fargo office yesterday morning?" someone asked.

"The same," Tollinger said. Neal felt shock run through him. "He got away with five thousand dollars in gold."

"So that's it." The Englishman turned his amused glance on Neal.

No, Neal thought, that can't be it. But there was doubt in the thought.

"What did the guard say?" That was from Gruening, the owner.

"He didn't say anything. He died last night. You don't talk much with a bullet through your head."

That made it murder. It wasn't possible, Neal told himself. Or was it?

"Where do you come in, Tollinger?"

Neal couldn't see the owner, and so he could more readily sense the fat man's thought processes, the slow groping to find on which side of the balance the greater power—or money—lay.

"He took Rev's horse to get away. We don't like that. Besides, the sheriff's over at the other end of the county. He won't be back till tomorrow. What are we supposed to do, leave things to you fellows?"

"We do all right," Gruening said. "What happened to the posse that started after him?"

"Twenty men? They've raised nothing but a cloud of dust, so far."

"There were twenty-four of you, then. And you can't catch one wounded man in a day and a half!"

"How did you know he was shot?" Tollinger asked suspiciously.

Gruening grunted. "I'm a saloon keeper. I hear things."

There was a pause, in which spurs made a lively jingle in the room. Then another, younger voice said, "I shot him from the hotel window."

"Rev's afraid he won't get proper credit," the Englishman muttered.

"I was upstairs with—never mind who!" Rev Tollinger's laugh was boyish. It was also too loud. "I fired one shot and crippled him. He ran."

"Very commendable," the Englishman said softly. He was turned half around on the seat beside Neal, watching the room. There was a silver-mounted pistol in his lap.

Christian Tollinger said, "I'll ask just once more, Gruening. Is he here?"

Gruening didn't answer at once, and Neal wondered, with indrawn breath, whether the metallic glint of the Englishman's pistol were visible from the look-out chair.

Then Gruening said truculently, "I haven't seen anybody but you on a Tollinger horse. Do you think I'd hide a murderer?"

There was a low ripple of amusement from the Englishman. Gruening could see the pistol all right. And so he'd decided where the balance of power lay, Neal thought grimly.

"Stay still," the Englishman warned. "He's looking everyone over."

"You down there in the corner!" Tollinger said. "Stand up!"

Neal's muscles tensed. For answer, the Englishman turned and leaned long arms upon the back of the wooden seat.

"Oh, it's you, Creswicke. Who's that with you?"

"My foreman."

"Jessup?"

"No. Samson. I hired him last week. Jessup left."

"Why don't you quit playing around with horses and whisky and settle down to ranching? You might make a go of it."

"I *have* made a go of it," the Englishman said, smiling. "In my own way."

"You're a dabbler, Creswicke. You dabble in this and that—"

"And look and listen. You should try that, Tollinger. It can be very amusing."

"I haven't the time," Tollinger said in an annoyed voice. "Come on, let's get out of here." The door slammed, bringing in a draft of fiery-hot air.

The Englishman watched them go, then turned to Neal. "You'll have to pay Gruening, you know. And you'd better make it liberal, because they'll be back."

"I don't have that five thousand dollars," Neal said. His voice sounded strangled.

"So you hid it. That was smart. In that case, we'd better go, too."

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There was no more sound in the field, and Neal raised his head

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"Where?"

"My ranch. Infection sets in fast in this country. You don't want to die yet, do you?"

Neal sat very still. "What do you want of me?"

"Not your money," Creswicke got up, smiling. "Come on."

THE trail was narrow. Through shiny green creosote bush, it climbed steadily into the hills above the saloon. Neal could only guess how close the Tollingers were. But haste woud have been fatal, drawing attention to him, signaling at once who rode with Creswicke.

Neal asked, "How much farther?" The drab brown hills were beginning to shimmer, and it wasn't all from heat waves.

"Don't lose your nerve now," said the Englishman. "You had enough to hold up the Wells Fargo office, shoot the guard, and ride off wounded. Where has it gone to?"

Neal chewed his lower lip. They were riding stirrup to stirrup where the trail broadened, but Neal didn't look at the Englishman. He didn't want to. Damn his imperturbability! He almost blurted, "It didn't have to be me. Not if I can't even remember it." But that would have struck Creswicke as amusing, and, besides, it wasn't entirely true.

Once, memory had fled before him like rain, but now it hammered at him. Now he couldn't forget. That devilish morning that seemed so long ago, but was only yesterday, kept beating at his brain.

The streets of town had been empty, he remembered now. His spurs as the dust came up around his boots made a ghostly jangle in the cold silence of pre-dawn. There had been no one up, no one he could see in the dark slots of the alleys. The western sky was purple plush. A mockingbird started up.

Then the other sound came—the shot—ripping open the quiet, and the echoes surged back from it. Then stillness again.

The shot came from a tar-papered shack set back from the street. He saw himself on that morning, standing in the doorway, looking in on crates ready for shipping. There was a gun in his hand. Had he fired it? He didn't know, but he remembered the cold feel of it, even now.

He remembered standing there, and peering down at something on the floor—a man in a black suit that seemed too darkly appropriate. His string tie was askew. You saw things like that because you didn't want to look at the rest of him, at where the man's face had been before it was shot away. His eyes had been open, staring up at Neal.

You looked back at the string tie. *Please,* the eyes said.

Then the second shot came, and so the man had gotten an answer to his *please.* Only this time the bullet found Neal. He felt himself flung violently backward, as if the shack had fallen upon him. He had stumbled and gone down on one knee, desperately fumbling for safety, for the gun that somehow was no longer in his hand.

He got up and stumbled again, and would have fallen, except for the solidness behind him: for a brief moment, the velvety touch of animal hide. The horse he had fallen against lunged sideways and screamed, a high, human sound. She was hitched short to a post before the shack.

He caught the reins and loosened them in one jerk. His foot grabbed at the stirrup, lost it, then found it just before the mare lunged again.

That was the way he had ridden out of town, only half in the saddle, clutching onto mane and saddlehorn, wanting only to get away from that battered face on the shack floor, from the pain that struck him with stunning force.

With the bend of his wrist, Neal wiped sweat off his face. Had he fired the shot that killed the guard? Had he? A gun had been in his hand when he stood in the doorway; he was sure of that. But the Tollinger horse had been hitched within a few feet. Had he stolen it earlier, hoping that if its theft remained unnoticed for a few hours, it might make him less conspicuous in the countryside?

He remembered, but it was all dimly seen, darkly remembered. They rode on over the rising curves of the hills, and Neal heard the dusty brush rake back as they passed through, and listened for other sounds behind him, and watched the mare's ears. They would twitch if she heard something he hadn't.

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And he thought of Lorelei. In the pale sunlight, he saw her combing her long hair, heard her grandmother's tortoise shell comb crackle through. The way she had of looking at him, her face down tilted, as if she could see him more clearly when she wasn't looking at him directly—he remembered that, when he'd forgotten nearly everything else of his life before.

The Englishman rode ahead, and Neal pushed the mare to catch up with him, on the level top of a red-rocked mesa. He said, "You want something of me. Just what is it?"

"Later."

"I'll hear about it now."

CRESWICKE pulled in the chestnut gelding. He raised his long lean body in the stirrups and turned to look at Neal. His eyes were cold.

"Let's put it differently. What do you want of me?"

"To let me rest a day or two," Neal said. "Then I'll need a fresh horse. This one marks me—to the Tollingers, to a sheriff's posse. Besides that, a Gantrie seeing me on it might shoot without asking questions."

"You're quite right," said Creswicke. "Then what do you propose to do?"

"Try to make it to town, and board the train."

Creswicke smiled. "It might work. They wouldn't think you'd be fool enough to come into town. However, I have something else in mind."

"What?"

"With a week's careful nursing, you'll be almost as good as ever—if you don't die of infection. After that you can go on to bigger and better things—unless you're afraid."

"What things?"

The Englishman unscrewed the cap of a whisky flask and drank, then offered the flask to Neal. Neal declined.

"Other things besides a Wells Fargo office. Although that was a good start."

"I'm not interested."

"You're afraid."

Neal didn't answer.

"Self-preservation."

"Rubbish!" Neal was abruptly angry.

"You'd rather die like a poleaxed steer. Strike out, and you'll live. Keep on running, and you'll die."

Creswicke wiped his mouth on a white linen handkerchief, carefully folded it, and put it back in his pocket. "What has a fighting cock got that a barnyard fowl hasn't? The barnyard rooster cowers in a corner and lets the fox kill him. He's afraid of death. The fighting cock has his instincts under control. He attacks, and it's the fox that dies."

"I'm not a fighting cock."

"You've got the same things in you. I propose to bring them out. It's an experiment, you might say."

"More holdups? No."

"You have no choice. Keep on going, and you'll be dead inside twenty-four hours of that wound, if someone doesn't kill you first. There's nothing else you can do except come home with me."

Sure, Neal thought. What could a man do, who was wanted for robbery and murder and crippled by a wound, but accept what help was offered him, on any terms? He gave Creswicke a hard, bitter look, and turned the mare.

"This is what I can do!" He set the mare down off the mesa, letting her pick her own trail.

Behind him, he heard the Englishman laugh. "Die, then!"

Neal resisted the impulse to go back and smash his fist into that strange, laughing face, smash to pieces that twisted intelligence, even if it took all his failing energy. But he went on, keeping the mare at a steady pace.

There was fearful power in the mid-afternoon sun. Neal set his hat down over his eyes, but sweat that he hadn't the strength to wipe away kept pouring into them.

He rode with almost no pain, in a dull numbness in which there was hardly any feeling, neither hope nor fear. Town was south, and he was headed south. The mare was nearly finished; he doubted she'd carry him that far. But that hardly mattered, either.

Once he saw spurts of dust, gray against the metallic blue of the sky. He didn't try to increase the mare's pace.

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Slowly she picked her way around brush thickets, the heavy-smelling creosote bush, and the prickle-branched mesquite. A jack rabbit ran in great leaps ahead of them, stopped, looked back, and ran again. Neal had to smile at that. It reminded him of himself.

Then, topping a ridge, he saw the fresh green of cottonwoods tracing a sinuous course below him. There was the river. His dry tongue stuck to his gums. The mare trembled, then started down without any urging. In ten minutes she was thigh deep in running water.

Neal filled his canteen and drank, letting the water trickle at first in dribbles down his parched throat. Then he forded the river, and in the shade of cottonwoods he sat his saddle, letting the cool relief from the scorch of the sun sink through skin and muscle.

For the past hour he had seen or heard nothing to alarm him. A dove complained in the dusty heat. Distantly, quail called to each other, one from the bank he had just quitted, another far ahead. All around him were signs of habitation: a felled tree, an irrigation ditch leading through hacked-down brush. Neal stood in the stirrups to see where the ditch led.

The clearing was small, and so was the *jacal;* the poles of its roof and sides newly cut and still green. Strings of red peppers drying from the *ramas* turned with the breeze. In the *milpa,* the ditch-nourished corn stood shoulder high. There was no sound from the *jacal;* from the *milpa,* only the stirring rustle of corn stalks above the bending ears.

STILL, something was not quite right. For a full minute Neal listened to the quiet drift of the river, to the whisper of leaves—watched the mare's ears twitch forward and back. She, too, sensed it, and now Neal knew what it was.

The quail—the one on the opposite bank, and the other, beyond the clearing—had ceased their persistent calling. An instant later he heard the sudden explosion of wings. After that there was stillness.

The Tollingers were ahead of him now. They were ahead as well as behind! If he went on, he rode into a trap. If he stayed, the brush wouldn't hide him. Nor could he hope that the tired mare would outrun four good horses, even if he could get through that tightening cordon.

Where to go? Blood drummed at his ears. He rode ahead a ways and came at last to the clearing, to the *jacal* set at the upper edge, and the *milpa* green in the sun. Horses behind *ocotillo* fence raised their heads to look at him.

On the knoll above the *jacal,* metal caught light and glinted. One that waited up there, with a rifle. Neal's glance went from that to the corral.

There was a fresh horse! He'd have a fighting chance, then. Only the cornfield stood between him and the corral. If he could crawl through the corn without exposing himself, without being seen. . . .

He turned the mare around in the direction from which he had come, and slipped from the saddle. Then, with a sharp slap on the horse's rump, he sent her thundering through thickets, back to the river.

The rifle blast followed almost immediately. It was a high whine, from beside the river. Neal threw himself flat on his belly. Sending the horse away would do it. He could gain the few minutes' diversion he needed.

The tall stalks bent and swayed, and the blades swung at him, as he wormed his way through. Above the gasp of his breathing he listened for sounds, and heard a rider go past at a run, desperately close. There were voices down by the river. And now he heard something else, the steady rustle of corn off to the left. It wasn't the wind.

Horses pounded up. From the edge of the field someone said, "Mat caught up the mare, Pa. He must be right around here." That was Rev Tollinger's voice.

There was no more sound in the field. Neal raised his head an inch or two.

A small, thin face, dark as the brown-stained corn silk, peered over the stalks at the riders. It was a boy of nine or ten, his trousers made of unbleached muslin and narrow in the legs, his shirt open and tied at the waist. He stood on a corn hill to get a better view.

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Neal watched him. He wasn't more than six feet distant. The corn-filled sack on the boy's shoulder swayed as he moved. With one hand he shifted it to a more comfortable position. His glance fell on Neal. His eyes grew dark and wide.

Neal held his breath. The boy stood in shocked immobility, peering down. Neal didn't move.

From a distance, the harsh tones of old Christian Tollinger's voice came. "Rev, go look in that *jacal*. Probably that's where he's hiding."

There were two men here, one—at least—by the river. Where was the fourth? Not on the bluff behind the *jacal;* that one had come past a minute ago. Moving very carefully, Neal put his index finger across his lips. The boy came alive then. He shook his head. His mouth flew open, but he made no sound.

"Is he in there, Rev?"

"No," the other answered. "He isn't."

"Look under the bed."

"There isn't any bed, just a mat on the floor. Not a stick of furniture, either. Don't scream, lady. Nobody's going to hurt you."

There was a woman in the *jacal*.

Neal fumbled in his pocket and found a silver dollar. Wordlessly, he held it in his outstretched palm so the boy could see it.

"Hey, you there in the field!" Christian Tollinger shouted. "Have you seen a man, a gringo?"

The boy's eyes didn't leave Neal. Neal turned the dollar in his hand, letting the silver catch the sun. The boy looked at it and searched Neal's face.

"Have you seen a gringo?"

The boy moistened his lips. His thin shoulders, under the threadbare shirt, trembled.

"Damn it, speak up!"

The boy tore his fascinated gaze from the coin. "No, senor. No gringo."

"*Es-tu* un *mentirosillo?*. I'll cut your throat if you're lying!" Christian Tollinger shouted.

The boy said nothing.

"Hell, Pa, the Mex kid doesn't know enough English to lie. His mother, here, doesn't need to speak English. She's good enough looking to—"

"Leave her alone, Rev!" Christian Tollinger said. "Mat, is he down there by the river?".

A distant voice answered. Neal couldn't make out the words.

CHRISTIAN TOLLINGER said, "He can't be far away, without a horse." He and his son went on toward the river.

Neal's breath collapsed in a whistling sigh as the sound of horses receded. "Thanks, young one," he said, extending the coin.

Smiling now, the boy reached out his hand to accept it. Then there was a woman standing at his shoulder, and Neal had time only to wonder how she had come so quickly and so noiselessly.

"No, Pepe, you must not take it," she said.

She was small, and finely made, with hair blue black as evening shadow. Her full white blouse was heavily embroidered, her cotton skirt extended to just below the brown calves of her legs, exposing bare feet.

She said, "I saw you when you crawled into the field, senor. Are you badly hurt?"

He could only nod.

Her glance went from him to the edge of the clearing, and she listened a moment to horses crashing through the brush. Then she looked back at Neal, and small white teeth sank into her lower lip.

"Pobrecito," she murmured at last, "they will tear you to pieces." She reached down and put her arm around his shoulders. "Pepe, you will take the other side, and help him."

Neal managed to get to his feet.

The woman said, "There is a place for you to hide. Quickly, senor."

Over the ridges of corn, she led him to a low earthen storage cellar, covered with green branches to keep out the heat. From a distance it looked like a pile of brush. Would it do, Neal wondered? He heard the woman's hurried, frightened breathing as she pulled aside the branches and opened a small door.

"Inside, senor." She was not looking at him, but at the brush by the river.

Neal had to crawl on hands and knees to get through the narrow opening, but inside there was more room. The cellar was several feet below the level of the ground. He pushed

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himself in among cheese, and ducked under a haunch of venison suspended from the roof.

The woman peered through the doorway at him. Her face was very white. She shut the door quickly, and the small room was instantly black.

Neal groped among sacks of stored vegetables, and seated himself on one, his back against the wall. His strength drained away like water, and now the trembling began in his limbs. He sat stiffly, trying to control the trembling. Then at last that passed, and for a long half hour he listened, and heard nothing.

The thought came, they've buried me before I'm quite dead.

That started a jumpy grin at the corners of his mouth. If you allowed it, you could get to feeling mighty sorry for yourself. Inside your own skull, inside the too-fragile skin of your body, you were a tight little island. You preserved that, you looked to your own hide first, when it came to the pinch. And you thought you'd done well enough.

But you hadn't, really. You had cut yourself off. When you preserved only your own hide, you were alone. And alone you didn't amount to anything, you were a lump of nothing. It came to him that he hadn't thought of much besides himself for two days.

There were voices outside now, very faint, muffled by earthen walls. He began to grow drowsy. He thought of Lorelei. Who was she except a name, an image inside his head? Had she any reality outside of that? But she had, he knew she had.

The mind had subtleties; it could conceal from you the things you most wanted to know. But the senses had subtleties, too. It seemed sometimes that she slipped outside thought, that he saw her, smiling or talking, laughing with the wind and the sun in her hair, taking lunch out of a hamper, her hands slim and brown and quick.

He saw her riding toward him as confidently as a man, hurrying because they never seemed to have enough time together. Yet she was the serious one. "Won't you ever grow up?" she used to ask, smiling at him. He didn't know quite how to take her. She could laugh as artlessly as a child, and the next minute be worrying about his maturity.

Seeing her this way, she seemed very close. Yet the moment he tried to focus thought upon her, she eluded him, like sunlight through dust motes. He opened his eyes.

Light streamed in through the open doorway, and the woman was peering in at him. "Can you come out without help, senor?"

"Where are they?"

"They are gone. They think you have escaped by the river, and so they are searching downstream."

Painfully, Neal crawled out, and blinked his eyes in the late sun. Shadows were long across the clearing, and distantly he heard the tinkle of a belled cow. The boy was nowhere in sight.

The woman said, "Pepe will watch. If the men come back, he will warn us."

SHE helped him to his feet, and slowly, stopping frequently to catch his breath, Neal walked to the *jacal* on the opposite end of the clearing. He sank down in the doorway.

"Esta casa es suya." This house is yours.

Neal was deeply moved. "Muchas gracias, senora," he said softly. She asked no questions; she demanded nothing of him.

Smiling faintly, the woman fetched him water from an olla, then went to the charcoal brazier in the yard. Neal smelled the sweet pungency of piñon burning, and heard the slap-slap of tortillas being formed with the hands.

"I am endangering you, senora."

She shrugged. *"No importa.* We are all born to trouble."

She was young, yet her eyes were old, full of wisdom. She placed a forefinger on the cooking tortilla, deftly lifted it, and slipped it into a napkin-covered basket.

Neal gazed out at the small clearing, peaceful in evening shadows. Then, hardly thinking about it, he asked, "Is there a train tonight, senora?"

"To where?"

"It doesn't matter. Anywhere."

Almost in spite of himself, he had spoken. Yesterday, this morning even, he would have clung closely to safety. Now he thought of

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the woman, of the boy, of the *jacal* and *milpa* so painfully won, and he wanted to leave them the way he had found them.

"Yes; there is a train." She spooned sauce upon the tortillas, rolled them, placed them in a napkin, and handed them to Neal.

"May I borrow a horse?"

"Porque no?" She looked up swiftly. "But surely you are not leaving, senor."

"Yes. I've put you in a bad enough spot already."

"But you cannot leave. You are hurt. We will keep you safe here."

"We?"

Her throat tinged pink, and there was pleasure in her eyes. *"Mi esposo,* Carlos. He is out now, hunting the deer that come down to drink at twilight. One *cartucho,* one deer. Cartridges are expensive. He would want you to stay."

"Why should he?"

She shrugged. "You have troubles. So do we all. Life is easier when we help each other."

Neal swallowed hard. He said, "I have to go on, senora. Would you saddle a horse for me?"

She hesitated, then got up, brushing grass from her knees. "Si, senor, if that is what you wish."

Neal ate the tortillas, with the hot, spicy sauce, and felt the good warmth burn its way down to his stomach. Presently the woman returned, leading a sorrel horse with blunt mustang lines, and muscles rippling across its chest. She helped Neal mount, and handed him more tortillas wrapped in a napkin.

"There is a trail that follows the river, and it will bring you to town. *Vaya con Dios,* senor."

He sat looking down at her a moment, wanting to say something. But instead he smiled, raised the tips of two fingers to his hat, and went on across the clearing.

Neal saw the boy coming, leading the cow. He took one of the tortillas from the napkin, inserted two silver dollars, then re-wrapped the tortilla. Riding up to the boy, he said, "Your mother said to give you this," and handed him the tortilla.

The boy grinned widely, and turned to watch him cross to the other side of the cornfield.

Neal spurred the sorrel, rode down to the river, and found the trail that the Tollingers had churned up with hoofprints. He rode on at a steady pace, stopping frequently to listen, over a trail that sometimes followed the river so closely he splashed through water, and sometimes climbed to the bluff above.

At least it was he who was behind the Tollingers now, and that helped. And, around him, night was shutting down slowly. The sun sank in pure orange behind the ridges, lighting up sandstone spires to a fiery red that faded to purple, then gray, and finally to deep black.

Then it was dark, and there was a glimmer of campfire far ahead of him. That would be the Tollingers, forced to give up the hunt until daylight. He didn't venture close, but crossed the river and went along for a mile on the other side before recrossing and picking up the trail again.

Some of the tension that had clung to Neal dropped from him now. He didn't have the Tollingers to worry about any more. They were out of the picture. So it might be that the rest wouldn't be hard; maybe he'd make it.

The first sight of town came upon him suddenly. There was a sharp rise in the ground, and then, spread out below him, the flicker of lights in darkness.

He ate more of the tortillas, drank from his canteen, and went on, but faster, afraid he might miss the night-train out of town. If he did, there would be no place to hide for another day, no further hope for him. At the bottom of the slope, a half mile from town, he decided to ride more cautiously, to leave the trail and come in by another route.

BUT he had decided too late. Two horsemen rode out from either side of the brush. He had no warning.

"Just hold it there," one of the men said.

The rifles pointed at his chest killed Neal's impulse to put spurs to the horse. He pulled the mustang in and waited.

The one who had spoken struck a match and raised it to Neal's face. "You almost made it, Bransom. But you didn't."

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"What makes you think that's who I am?"

The man laughed. "Is that supposed to be a joke?" The match went out, but in its brief light Neal had seen a young, lean face, with a tawny thatch of hair under the tipped-back hat. He knew the man.

"Yale Gantrie," he said slowly.

It was the first person Neal had recognized in two days, the first solid fact he'd had to hang onto. This was Yale Gantrie, one of Luther's sons. Now other facts began to fit themselves together.

"Luther's waiting for you," Yale Gantrie said.

With Gantrie and the other man on either side of him, Neal rode around the base of the hill. Among the rocks, at the entrance to a shallow cave, a small fire burned and cast deep shadows. Luther Gantrie straightened from tossing a stick into the fire. He was a thin man with a look of iron-willed hardness on his weathered cheeks. He stood with his hands behind his back and watched the riders coming up.

He said, "This would have been neatly done, Bransom, if it hadn't been for your friend Creswicke."

"Creswicke wasn't much of a friend."

"Yeah." Gantrie spat into the fire. "And I suppose we have the Tollingers to thank that you didn't get clean away long before this."

"You're mighty interested in me, Gantrie."

"I am." Gantrie's face was stiff and expressionless. "I wouldn't give a hoot, except for Jessa. I'd have let the sheriff take care of you, or the Tollingers. But Jessa's the one who's going to be hurt."

Jessa Gantrie. *Lorelei.* Neal fitted the two names together, and knew that was the way they belonged.

"You and Jessa meant to get married, with my permission or not. She told me that much. She wrote you a letter and asked you to come."

Yes, that was the way it had been. He had come here intending to take Lorelei away with him. That was the reason he had been in town yesterday morning. It seemed simple and obvious now. He could even remember his job up north, the loneliness of it, seeing Lorelei so seldom and always in secret.

"Was that so terrible? We've waited two years, mainly on your account, Gantrie, you're a stubborn, pig-headed man."

"I know all that," Luther Gantrie snapped. "I don't like you; I never did. And I would have fought this thing right down to the last minute. Jessa should have a man for a husband, not a boy. What have you done with your two years?"

"Worked. Saved my money."

"How much?"

Neal reddened. "A top hand doesn't make much."

Gantrie snorted.

"There's enough to stock a small ranch—or nearly."

"You call that enough?"

"Maybe not," Neal said tightly, "but waiting's slow work, Gantrie. We were fed up with it, and Jessa couldn't take much more of your feuding."

Gantrie's thin lips straightened. "I didn't start that."

"You kept it going."

"That's neither here nor there. You needed money; you admit that. So you pulled a holdup, and killed a man, to get it."

"Do you think I'd go that far?"

Gantrie fixed his uncompromising stare on Neal. "If you didn't do it, why did you run?"

"Because I was scared. That's an admission I wouldn't have made once."

But there was no use arguing about it. The facts were plain enough: he had been seen at Wells Fargo office with a gun in his hand, and he had left that gun there, and escaped on a Tollinger horse. The money was gone. The guard was dead.

He couldn't swear that he hadn't killed the guard. Perhaps he never would know what had happened.

He told Gantrie that. He said, "I don't have proof I didn't do it. So nothing I say will mean a thing to you."

Gantrie's eyes were cold and indifferent. There was no knowing what he was thinking. His hands came from behind his back. There was a small stick in them, and he broke it in half and stood studying the pieces.

Neal said, "What now?"

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GANTRIE didn't look up. "Right till this minute, I meant to kill you if I caught you—if the Tollingers didn't catch up with you first." He broke the stick again with a decisive snap and tossed the pieces into the fire. "Now I know that wouldn't do Jessa any good. She'd always think you were innocent."

"So?"

"I'm letting you go."

It was a trick, Neal decided, looking at Gantrie, at that tough, time-hardened man, with the furrows running deep around his unrelenting mouth.

Yale Gantrie spoke for the first time. His lean face was pinched with anger. "That's plain damned foolishness! He'll be back someday for Jessa."

"He won't be back," Luther said to his son. "He's started on a certain road, and now he'll have to keep to it. Sooner or later, Jessa will see how it is."

No, he wouldn't be back, Neal thought. The most he could do for Lorelei now was to stay away from her. Yet it didn't ring true, what Luther Gantrie was doing.

"Go on, get going," Luther said roughly.

Neal turned the sorrel then and, with anger working in him, set out for the lights along the river.

Town was spread out on both sides of the Agua Caliente, gas flambeaus casting flickering shadows on weathered board houses and stores. It was quiet and shut up on this side, but on the other were the raucous saloons and dancehalls, and beyond them the railroad depot. Neal heard the chuff-chuff of an engine in the darkness.

This town was familiar to him, Neal realized now, every inch of it. Less than forty-eight hours ago he had ridden through here, and something had happened that had set him to running for is life, that had set men after him. But exactly what it was, he didn't remember yet. And now there was no use trying to remember.

His horse's hoofs rattled on the bridge across the river, and at last he found the railroad depot and the train waiting before it. There were a few men standing by the depot wall. He saw no danger there.

If he circled to the other side of the station, the dark side, and climbed onto the coal tender, he'd be safe; a wanted man, yes, but safe for a while. By morning he'd be in New Mexico, and he could lose himself there.

He'd be safe, but he wasn't happy about it. There was a deep unease within him that had nothing to do with Lorelei, that cut deeper, even, than anger. He was running away, wasn't he? For two days he had run, and maybe he couldn't help that, because there'd been no place to stop and make a stand.

But he'd been running just the same. And if he kept on, what then?

He'd never know whether or not he had held up the Wells Fargo office. He'd never remember whether he had killed a man, because he wouldn't want to remember. He'd keep that knowledge from himself. Knowing what had happened, he'd have to do something about it. If he didn't know, he'd be safe.

The big bell on the engine tolled, and the wheels were wreathed in steam. Then couplings clanged together and the train chuffed out of the station. Neal watched it go. He had made his decision hours ago. He had made it, he knew now, when he left the senora, when he had stopped letting panic guide him. He started toward town.

He didn't ride back across the river. What he wanted was on this side. He kept to the middle of the street, in the shadows, and his eyes went over the three or four cheap saloons, and found at last the dancehall, with a saloon on one side and a gambling house on the other.

An alley ran between the dancehall and the gambling house. He inspected it carefully and turned the horse in. In the lot behind the saloons was a square, drab dwelling, and that was what he was looking for—the boarding-house where the dancehall girls lived. A gas light hissed at the top of a long flight of steps. He didn't like that, but he went up and knocked upon the door.

In a moment the click of high heels came, and the door was opened by a stout, heavily rouged and powdered woman, dressed in a loose-fitting wrapper.

She said crossly, "The girls aren't in now."

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She stopped, staring at his torn, dirty clothes, at the stubble of beard on his face.

"I want to see the girl who was with Rev Tollinger night before last. Where is she?"

The woman hesitated. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do. Where is she?"

"You've got your nerve!"

NEAL'S hand went into his pocket, and he held out what money remained to him. It wasn't much of an inducement. The woman took it and thrust it into a pocket of her wrapper.

She said, "All right. Tina sings at the Golden Palace. She'll be through at two in the morning."

"Will she come back here?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll wait for her." Neal turned and descended the steps. He went back to the alley and leaned against the wall.

Maybe this was a fool play he was making, a long shot. But by morning, he hoped, he'd know the truth. And he'd know what to do about it. And if he found out nothing? There was time later to worry about that.

He dozed, and jerked himself awake. The air was still warm; it felt like tepid soup. The need for sleep was overpowering. He was almost used to the pain in his shoulder, if you could get used to a thing like that.

Once he awoke to find that the porch light was out in the house. He stayed awake after that, and kept from dozing by biting his lips. An hour passed, two. There was no moon, and Neal watched the Big Dipper swing in its nightly rotations. It seemed to sink low in the sky.

He heard a piano from the dancehall, and laughter, and now and then someone go by in the street. No one entered the alley.

Then, abruptly, there was faint sound off to the left, in the direction of the house. He must have dozed again. He came to with a start, and that was a mistake.

"Don't move."

Neal froze. The voice was not a dozen feet distant. The woman had taken his bribe, but she had sent her warning; she had guessed what he was after and had sent a message. Footsteps came closer, and there was starshine on the gun Rev Tollinger held at Neal's middle.

He said, "You dropped right into my lap. I didn't think you'd do that."

Neal said, "It was a fool thing to do."

"Yes, and you don't make mistakes like that twice."

Neal turned his head, hoping desperately for a passerby in the street.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to shoot you here," Tollinger said, "if I can help it." He stepped back. "Walk ahead of me into the house."

Neal hesitated. Should he make his play now? But no, he wouldn't stand a chance. He walked to the house and ascended the steps.

"Open the door," Tollinger directed.

Neal felt the jab of the pistol in his back. He went in and stood in the darkness of the hall.

"Take five steps and then stop. Don't turn around."

Neal did so, his hands groping out around him. There was nothing in the hall but a table, and that was empty. He heard the scratch of a match, and gas light flared up from a wall bracket.

"You can turn around."

Would it come now? He turned slowly, and barely suppressed a grunt of surprise. This was a slight, wiry young man with yellow hair and eyebrows of the same color, and cold, almost colorless eyes. He, too, was looking Neal over closely.

He said, "Well, this is the first chance I've had to get a good look at you."

"I've seen you once before," Neal said.

"Be careful."

"What's the difference?"

Keep him talking, Neal thought. Any delay was an advantage. And now he knew what he should have known before: that memory hadn't fled from him, he had fled from memory. First had come the shock of the injury, and then, knowing how great the odds were against him, a trick of the mind—an instinct of self-preservation, perhaps—had blocked out memory.

He said, "You must have needed the money real bad."

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Tollinger grinned crookedly. "I'm supposed to get along on what the old man doles out to me?"

"So you killed a man to get more."

"He put up a fight! My mask slipped and he recognized me."

"And you shot me, too, when I came in and found you there at Wells Fargo."

"Sure, what did you expect?"

Neal remembered now. He remembered coming in on the train late that night, and heading for the livery early the next morning to rent a horse for the ride out to the Gantrie ranch. Then the shot had come, and he had gone to investigate. He had had his gun out, but so had Tollinger, and Tollinger had fired first.

The rest he could piece together. Tollinger had returned to his hotel room and fired another shot from the window. Then he had spread his story. With the sheriff out of town, it had been easy to get people worked up, to organize a posse.

Neal said, "Why didn't you stick with the mob? Wouldn't it have been easier to catch me and hang me and get it over with?"

"You might have talked first, and I couldn't take that chance. Someone would have noticed that you'd been shot from in front, not from behind, the way it would have been if I'd shot you from the hotel window."

"So you went home and got your own crew started after me. I'm curious, Tollinger. Does Christian know the truth?"

YOUNG TOLLINGER grinned. It would have been a boyish grin, except for the brassy coldness of his eyes. "I'm Pa's fair-haired boy, remember? He wouldn't want to see me hang. None of them liked it, but we Tollingers stick together when we're in trouble."

That was the way it had been, Neal thought. And he hadn't remembered until now because it had been easier to run, to try to escape than to stay and face the odds. In the grip of panic, his mind had refused to reveal the truth to him.

Tollinger's pistol glinted in the gas light. Neal stared at it and said, "There are two things you're forgetting, Tollinger. First, I dropped my gun when you shot me. It hadn't been fired."

"I took care of that. What else?"

"This wound in my shoulder. That's evidence you can't do much about. It's still likely someone will notice I took it from in front, not behind."

Tollinger shrugged. "Perhaps, but I doubt it. That's a small chance to take." He raised the pistol very slightly.

It was time. Neal tensed to spring forward. That wouldn't do any good, but at least he'd be trying. There was a doorway to Tollinger's right, leading to a darkened parlor. Neal raised his voice.

"Look behind you, Tollinger!"

The old trick almost worked. But Tollinger grinned. "That won't help, either." The second joint of his thumb pulled back the hammer of the pistol.

Then, as Neal started his lunge, a voice from the parlor spoke. "Drop that gun, Tollinger!"

Rev Tollinger whirled. But before he could fire, a shot came out of the darkness. He shrieked, grabbing his wrist, from which blood spurted. The pistol clattered to the floor.

Neal kicked it aside with his boot and turned to face Luther Gantrie, standing in the doorway.

Gantrie said, "I heard everything. So did the two men with me."

"How did you get here?"

"I followed you," Gantrie said. "You claimed you were innocent, so I decided to give you some rope to see what you'd do about it. I was never far behind you. You'd never have left town, if that's what you'd had in mind."

Young Tollinger said, "This will never come to trial. Pa will take care of it."

"Your father won't be able to do a thing about it this time," Gantrie said. "And with you out of the way, it's my guess he'll come to terms. More than anyone else in your clan, Tollinger, you've kept this feud going." Some of the harshness slipped from Gantrie's face as he looked at Neal. "Jessa's waiting for you," he said softly. Then, surprisingly, he smiled.

Jessa was in the doctor's office, and Neal

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guessed she had been there a long time. Her face was pale with fatigue, but some of the color returned when Neal came in.

She said one word, "Neal!" and flung herself into his arms. Then he was holding her tightly, pressing his lips against her hair.

She said, "Neal, when you didn't come yesterday, at first I thought—I thought—"

"That I'd changed my mind?"

She nodded.

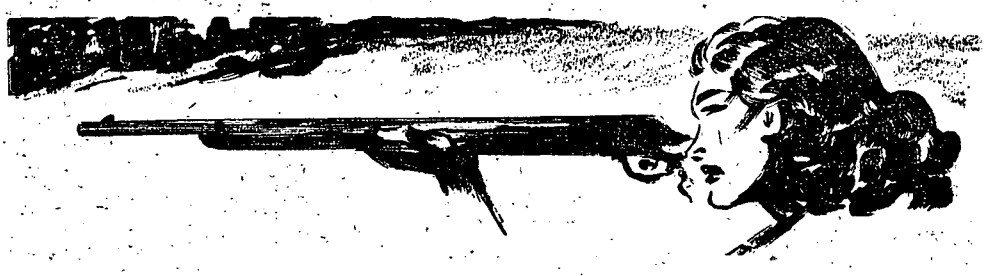
"When I got your letter, I came as fast as I could," Neal said. "Didn't you think I would, that I'd try to get you out of a mess like this?"

She nodded again, smiling, and in her eyes was a new confidence. It hadn't been there before.

He held her face between his two hands. "Your father was partly right about me, Lorelei. I had some growing up to do. I had to learn to think my own way out of problems." He rubbed her cheek with his knuckles. "We'll get along somehow, Lorelei. We'll make out."

"I know we will," she whispered.

They'd make out fine, Neal told himself. And they would do it on their own. He would see to that.



Coming up in the next issue

MANHUNTER

Julia carried a gun for only one reason . . . to kill the man who said he loved her, and who had put her husband in jail

A Magazine-Length Novel

By KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

COWMAN'S DAUGHTER

Steve was giving up his home, his job, his girl . . . rather than tell the lie that would be sure to start a range war

An Exciting Novelette

By ED LA VANWAY

BACK TRACK

With all his being, Merritt wanted to help this child . . . but a hunted man cannot follow the dictates of his heart

A Western Short Story

By H. A. DE ROSSO

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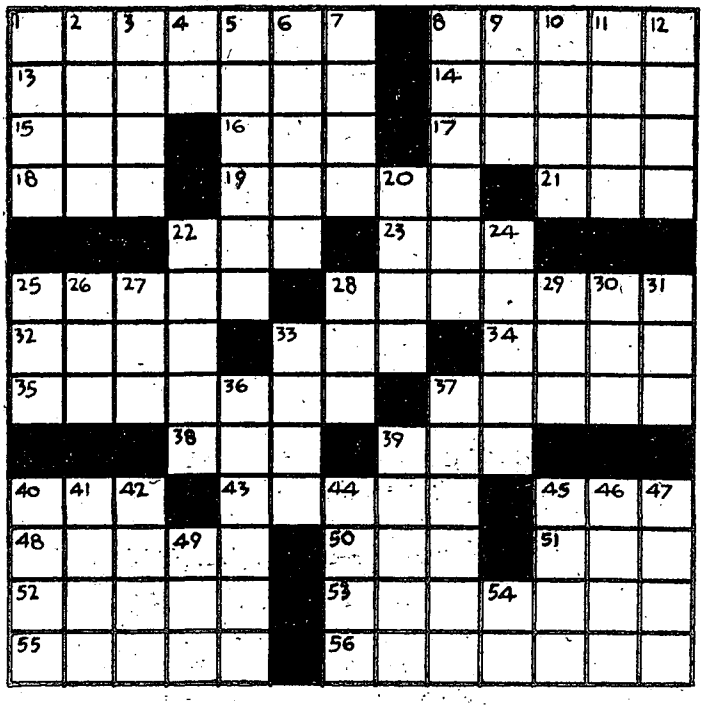
THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Hump-backed cattle
8 Western tablelands
13 To set free
14 Crockett's last stand
15 Small insect
16 To fasten
17 Ocean vessel
18 Also
19 Cattle-land
21 East-northeast (abbr.)
22 Took first prizes
23 Dined
25 —— Jones, actor
28 To herd cattle
32 Planting grain
33 Route
34 Prison
35 Cowboys' seats
37 Lariats
38 To yelp
39 Beam of light
40 Peas in a ——
43 Discoloration
45 Past
48 Borders on
50 Sack
51 At this time
52 Wild West show
53 Everlasting
55 Years of youth
56 Lassos

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

DOWN

1 Annoying child
2 City in Nevada
3 Female singing voice
4 The man
5 Motherly woman
6 Native of Asia
7 Observed
8 Saddle bag
9 Man's name
10 Mentally sound
11 Prayer ending
12 Painful
20 —— Cooper, actor
22 Cowboy
24 To like
25 Donkey
26 Meadow
27 Guided
28 Existed
29 Opening
30 To tell fibs
31 Overhead railways (colloq.)
33 Sobbed
36 Cowboys' ropes
37 Texas mounted policeman
39 Lariat
40 Portion
41 Wood-wind instrument
42 Would-be cowboy
44 Cain's brother
45 Girl's name
46 Farm animal
47 Night birds
49 Twice five
54 Rhode Island (abbr.)

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VERNE JESSUP crossed the street in the haze of early evening, and went into the Hudson's Bay store. The store was officially closed for the day but Sandy McBean, the ticket agent for the stage line, waited for business behind a poster tacked to the counter marked "Calgary-Edmonton Stagecoach."

Verne's eye lingered on the poster's bold black letters, and he smiled inwardly. He'd be driving that stagecoach tomorrow morning. He halted at the counter and addressed Sandy jovially.

"Howdy, Sandy. Any more passengers yet?"

"No so far. Just the Wallaces. Looks like the stage will be empty from Red Deer Crossing."

Empty or not, Verne would be handling the reins, and for a roustabout who'd dreamed big and good while he cleaned out the stables, it meant deep unspoiled satisfaction. He settled his elbows on the counter and chatted with Sandy. In the hardware corner Cliff Holzinger, Moss Ewing and Emmett Cooper were passing around a whisky bottle. When their noise subsided abruptly, Verne turned his head and saw a girl standing hesitantly in the door. Her worried searching eyes fell on the poster, and she walked quickly past the stares of Cliff, Moss and Emmett, to Sandy.

"I want to buy a ticket to Edmonton, please."

"Yes, ma'am." Sandy flourished the pen. "Name, please?"

"Christine Rourke."

"Mrs. or Miss?"

The girl colored faintly. "Miss."

"And you're traveling from—?"

"Montreal."

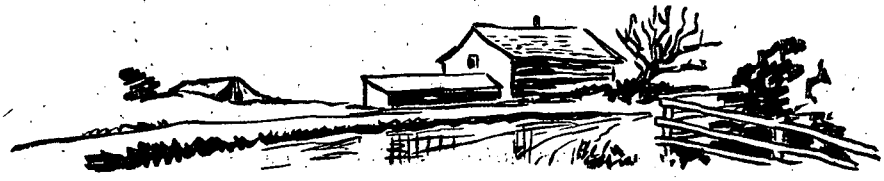
Sandy wrote. "And destination Edmonton. Return ticket, ma'am?"

The girl bit her lip and Verne, studying her profile, decided, it means a lot to her.

Christine Rourke said, "Yes, please."

When she was leaving, Cliff, Moss, and Emmett found their tongues. Cliff blocked her way. Hadn't anybody told her there was a shooting every week in Edmonton, and Friday was reserved for hangings? Or that up there married women carried pistols, and lone women shotguns?

Showdown at



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Boulet fell against the fence, and it snapped under his weight

Battle River

By M. E. BRADSHAW

VERNE JESSUP HAD two arguments to settle . . . and he had to win both of them before he could hope to marry Christine

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If she realized they were joking it didn't make much difference. She was apparently a stranger to the ways of this wild young country, she was surrounded by three roughly-dressed, unshaven men smelling of whisky, and the quiver of her chin was real.

Verne pushed between Moss and Cliff, and took off his hat. "I'm the stagecoach driver, ma'am. I get paid to drive, but I also get paid to look after my passengers." He threw a sour look at the three grinning faces. They were all bachelors, all looking for wives; no wonder they wanted the girl to stay in Calgary. "What they told you is a pack of lies. I think I'll take them out in back and knock their heads together."

The gratitude in her face embarrassed him. Verne wouldn't have called it a pretty face, but it was framed by glossy brown hair, under a blue straw bonnet, and her eyes were warm speckled brown, with thick dark lashes and brows. Caught off guard, he went hollow with loneliness. Then sense came back to him. Yes, you're ready for a wife, he thought ironically. You own a plot on the edge of town, with a sod hut and a pile of buffalo bones on it. And you've had this job two days.

Aloud, he said brusquely, "You go on to your hotel room and get a good night's rest. We leave at nine in the morning."

She tried to smile, and thanked him in a small tight voice. Moss, Cliff and Emmett mutely watched her pass the store's grimy window, and then their loud angry voices broke loose.

"She's the first lone woman in Calgary in seven months—or maybe you don't keep count, Jessup! We were only having a little fun, and maybe it wasn't so much of a joke as you thought. Ever think some of us might like to get married, Jessup?"

Verne faced them patiently. He heard the heavy boots cross the doorstep and paid little attention, but it came to the point where the owner of the boots, shoulders planted against the wall near the door, openly listening, finally had to be dealt with.

Turning to eye him, Verne was aware of the man's look of rough, ready competence. His face, shadowed by a black broad-brimmed hat, was large-featured, impassive, its swarthiness deepened by sun and wind. He wore a leather vest over a black shirt, and the neckerchief knotted at his throat was black. Moss, Emmett, and Cliff stopped talking, and the man stepped forward and nodded curtly to Verne.

"So you're the new driver. I've heard about you."

Puzzled, Verne pushed his hat back. The man, he decided, was neither a cowboy nor a sodbuster. "Is that so? I don't seem to know you."

"The name's Alf Boulet." That accounted to Verne for the man's swarthiness; he must be part Frenchman, part Indian. "You wouldn't have heard of me. I was driving a twenty-mule team in California when you were still in knee pants."

Boulet continued, "I couldn't help overhearing your tiff with the boys here. They were saying that for someone who hasn't even driven that stagecoach yet, you're getting mighty big for your britches."

Verne flushed. "They, and you, are welcome to prove it any time it's convenient for you."

He rejoined Sandy at the counter, disturbed by the presence of a mule skinner in the stage line's terminal. And Boulet's look of hard-bitten efficiency was no cloak; it was as much a part of him as the growth of beard on his face.

CLIFF, Moss and Emmett stood wordless and watchful, the whisky bottle temporarily forgotten. Boulet walked to where Verne stood at the counter, took money from his pocket, and counted it out.

"One way ticket to Edmonton," he told Sandy.

Sandy moved to the ticket rack, and Verne asked evenly, "You'll be staying in Edmonton, then, Boulet?"

Boulet looked him up and down, and his face registered contempt. "No, I'm not staying in Edmonton. I'll be coming back on the stage, too. Only I figure I'll be driving it then."

Verne gasped at the man's blunt honesty. Sandy swung around from the ticket rack. "How do you figure that, mister?"

"I applied for this job six months ago. They didn't need me then, and now a green kid's

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got the job." His head shook in disgruntled unbelief. His hard calm gaze swung from Verne to Sandy. "I'm going along for the ride, you might say—in case anything happens to the driver."

Verne pulled himself together, realizing his mouth had gone dry. "In case anything like *what*," he asked, "happens to the driver?"

"Could be a dozen different things. Wheel might come off, axle might break, horses might bolt. And drivers get hurt in accidents. That's where I'd come in." His eyes lingered brightly on Verne's. "And when I got that stagecoach to Edmonton, boy, I'd have your job."

Verne's wild swelling rage was broken by Sandy's crisp steady voice. "No ticket for you, mister. Get out of here or I'll call Constable Williams."

"No," Verne said through stiff lips. "No, by darn!" He faced Boulet, his anger under control now. "Williams'll keep nobody off that stage on my account, Sandy. If I'm not big enough to hold the job, then a better man deserves it. If he can get it away from me, he can have it!" He swung around, passed Cliff, Moss, and Emmett, who had fallen into a dead silence, and wheeled out the door.

On the street, he replied mechanically to the greetings of vague blurred faces. Boulet's talk of an accident didn't fool him. Boulet wouldn't wait for something to happen, and Verne knew the man's intelligence would rule out a clumsy attempt to create one. There a simpler way. It would involve a bloody, crippling fist fight, and it would amount to the age-old law of the survival of the fittest.

It wouldn't be the first fight Verne had either won or lost. But to lose to Boulet meant losing the driver's job, since Boulet would see to it that his condition after the fight kept him off the driver's seat. And Verne wanted that driver's job. It meant money, and money meant a new plank-floored poplar cabin for his lot, and a chance to get himself a wife.

It was deep starlit night when Verne turned in at the boarding house, and when the sun rose he'd slept little. He dressed and walked downtown to the Chinese cafe for breakfast. When he came out, the stagecoach had been turned out by the roustabouts, and it stood in front of the Hudson's Bay store. He walked toward it with brisk steady steps, stopping beside the right lead horse to pat her neck. Her name was Dorothy, and she'd nailed down the driver's job for Verne one blustery day last March by bolting at a blowing newspaper, seconds after Morgan Stewart, the driver, had handed Verne the reins.

McLeod, the owner of the stage line, had witnessed the battle that lasted the length of the block. His comment as Verne wheeled the quieted team past the store to the stables had been a brief "Good job, Jessup."

But McLeod had remembered, and when Morgan had stamped in and quit last week, battered and furious after coaxing the horses through a hailstorm north of town, Verne found the job in his lap.

Now he swung around, frowning, and addressed the roustabout up on the box holding the reins. "Did you test the running gear?"

"Sure did. It's fine."

Ernie Hammond, the shotgun rider, rounded the back of the coach. He eyed Verne curiously. "Anything wrong, or are you just plain nervous?"

"Just plain nervous," Verne said shortly. He'd tell Ernie about Boulet when they got rolling; there wasn't time now. The passengers were gathering at the stagecoach door. He stepped forward to help Mrs. Wallace up the steps and into the coach with a brisk, "Good morning, ma'am. Hope you have a nice trip." Her husband followed her, a bluff red-faced man of seventy, who confided cheerfully that they were going to Red Deer Crossing to count their new grandchildren.

Christine Rourke approached and smiled wanly. "Good morning, ma'am," Verne said gravely, noting the dark circles under her eyes. She looked as if she hadn't slept last night. He wondered why she hadn't, as he helped her up the steps with a hand tucked under elbow. Feeling the thinness of her arm through the cloth, he thought, she needs some good fresh air, lots of milk to drink. He guessed briefly, enviously, that she was going to Edomnton to be with her sweetheart, and the thought crossed his mind with unwarranted violence, he'd better be good to her.

There was no sign of Boulet. Verne's hopes that he wouldn't show up soared, and then

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sank as the barbershop door opened and Boulet walked unhurriedly toward the stagecoach. The loss of his growth of beard accentuated the bold hard cast of his face.

Verne said curtly, "Another minute and you'd have been late. Get in."

Boulet retorted, "Just make sure you aren't late getting into Willow Creek, driver," and tilted the coach with his entering weight.

VERNE slammed the door. He wished he'd caught Boulet's booted ankle in it. He climbed up to the box and took the reins from the roustabout. Beside him, Ernie unslung the shotgun, and McLeod watched with Sandy from the store's doorway. Understandable or not, that watchful eye of McLeod's rattled Verne.

He shouted at the roustabouts, "Hurry up and get those steps loaded!" and waited impatiently for the answering shout, "All set!"

He took a final hasty tally himself. He kicked the brake off, gee-hawed at the horses, and felt the coach rock forward, then roll smoothly down the street and across the wooden bridge spanning the Bow River. The long winding climb from the valley floor took the edge off the team's coltishness, and Verne relaxed a little and grinned at Ernie.

"This beats following farm horses with a load of hay."

"Oh, sure. Nothing to it. Nothing ever happens."

Verne frowned. This was the time to tell Ernie about Boulet, but it didn't come easily. He assured himself that Sandy, who'd heard every word of Boulet's would gladly back him up. Yet no matter how he phrased it, it carried the same taint of, help me fight my battle, Ernie.

He glanced at Ernie, who was scanning the horizon with the ease of a man in a rocking chair on his own front porch. Verne couldn't tell him. He gave a short resigned sigh. He'd worry about Boulet alone.

The stagecoach pulled into Willow Creek when the shadows were reaching across heading fields of wheat. Verne left the Wallaces and Christine in the cool comfortable parlor of the overnight inn to wait for dinner, and went outside to help Ernie and the hostler unload the baggage. Boulet had stayed near the coach, and now he walked around the team with a critical appraising eye.

Verne stifled the impulse to tell him to get away. Ernie peered from the top of the coach, dangling a carpetbag. "This is the last one, Verne."

Verne was reaching up to take it when Boulet said explosively, "Why, you haven't even worn those horses out, man! You're cheating the passengers!"

Verne turned around. "We're on schedule, Boulet. We got here for supper, didn't we?"

"If I'd been handling the reins," Boulet said, "we'd have got here for afternoon tea." He turned on his heel.

Verne frowned uneasily after his broad heavy back swinging toward the house, and looked up at Ernie. "Did you hear that?"

"Sure did, Verne." Ernie's eyes, puzzled, followed Boulet into the house.

Verne said tersely, "Remember it, will you?" and took the carpetbag into the house.

He left it for the owner to claim and gave the hostler a hand unhitching and stabling the team. Then he returned to the house, noisy with the clatter of supper dishes in the kitchen. A raised emphatic voice pushed the clatter into the background.

"I tell you, folks, there'll be a runaway yet. There's too much life in those horses. I never saw a tired horse yet take a bit between its teeth. But a man learns these things by experience. Take me now. I've driven everything from a Red River cart to an Army supply wagon."

Verne didn't hear the rest of it. He shoved the kitchen door open with his hands balled into fists, seeing by the flickering wall-bracket lamps the four passengers at one table, and Ernie and the hostler's young son at another. He planted himself at Boulet's elbow, and there was a sudden flat silence for his words to fill.

"I'll take you, Boulet—now. What about it?"

Boulet put down his knife and fork and pushed back his chair. Ernie moved like a jackrabbit and came between them, his hand planted on Verne's shirt front, voice rough and commanding, telling him to cool down, just cool down and they'd settle it with words.

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Over Ernie's shoulder, Verne watched Boulet come to his feet, and he let his breath out slowly. Ernie's intervention had given Verne a second to think. He'd walked right into the bait Boulet'd put out. The man's normal speaking voice wouldn't have carried into the parlor through a closed door, so the mule skinner must have been talking loudly to make sure Verne heard the insulting words. And there'd be more bait, Verne knew, on every step till the end of the journey.

He left the kitchen by the back door, stumbled over the chopping block in the dark woodshed, and leaned on the corral fence in the glimmering dusk. He wouldn't fight Boulet. He wouldn't give him the driver's job on a platter, with an apple in its mouth.

Someone approached from the house, and the hostler's plump, bright-faced wife said, "I brought your supper, Mr. Jessup. You eat it, now. Never mind him in there. We've seen his kind before, people who think they can drive better than the driver. They're common as lice in a henhouse." She gave his arm a brisk comforting pat and put the plate in his hand. "Eat up, Mr. Jessup."

"Thank you," Verne called after her.

He didn't feel quite so alone now. He emptied the plate, set it on the ground, and braced his forearms on the fence, while wild clover sweetened the breeze and the stars came out. Minutes passed, and then weariness took his arms from the fence and turned his feet toward the house.

Someone rounded the corner of the house, walking aimlessly, and Verne halted and peered through the darkness. "Miss Rourke," he said with faint surprise.

"Good evening, Mr. Jessup."

It was a sober greeting, and her small solitary figure caught his sympathy strangely. He searched hastily for impersonal words. "Not asleep yet, Miss Rourke? I'd think the ride from Calgary would have tired you out."

"I am a little tired." She lowered her head and toyed with her reticule and, when her head lifted, tears sparkled on her eyelashes. "And I'm sorry that I ever came to this hateful country."

ASTONISHMENT left Verne's mouth open. An oddly compelling desire to help her prompted him to ask, "Why, Miss Rourke?"

"It's so primitive."

She said it with the calm finality of despair, and Verne suddenly swallowed the comforting words on the tip of his tongue. He'd been about to point out that once she was with her sweetheart, once she was married, things would be different. But he remembered the return ticket she'd bought last night, and slowly, bewilderingly, it dawned on him there was no sweetheart in Edmonton.

His voice sounded flat because he was thinking that there was nothing half so primitive as weeds sprouting boldly from the roof of a lonely sod hut. "I'm sorry to hear that,

THE FAST GAL

By LIMERICK LUKE

Although this gal's name was plain Sally,
She reigned as the Belle of the Valley.
Her style was so snappy,
When she wanted a pappy,
She roped one with no dillydally!

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ma'am." He added lamely, "You'll get used to it."

"Used to it?" Her voice scaled up and then dropped. "I won't be here long enough to get used to it, Mr. Jessup."

Curiosity stirred in him. It was almost two thousand miles from Montreal to Calgary, a long journey for a woman to make alone. He asked without rancour, "Whatever brought you out here, Miss Rourke?"

Her chin lifted firmly. "There are lots of pretty girls in Montreal, Mr. Jessup. I'm not one of them. But like the pretty ones, I want my own home and family. I made up my mind to go to Edmonton because men outnumber women considerably there. Well, I shall go to Edmonton, and I shall come back on the first stage. After that, I'll be quite content to spend the rest of my days in Montreal as a happily civilized spinster."

Verne's lips moved numbly with the only thing he could say. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good night, Mr. Jessup."

"Good night, ma'am."

He watched her walk toward the corner of the house with an aching core of disappointment in him. If he only had that poplar cabin on the lot— But he didn't. And then he thought of his small savings—ninety dollars—tucked away in the bureau in the boarding house.

He went after her and astounded himself by catching her hand and turning her around. He spoke swiftly because, for all his wanting a wife, it had never been so painfully urgent as it was now.

"Miss Rourke, things aren't as bad as you think in the Territories. Did you ever see a brand-new poplar cabin with three or four rooms, real floors, real glass in the windows, and a big stone fireplace in the parlor? They're real fine; snug in winter, cool in summer."

"It isn't just the houses, Mr. Jessup!" She backed away, white-faced, fighting tears. "It's the smell of buffalo hides everywhere you go, and people trading chickens and cows and even pots and pans because they have no money. You can't just live in this country. You have to fight to live. You were going to fight Mr. Boulet tonight because he's after your job, your living. I know you were." Her eyes welled with tears. "It's things like that."

Verne said heavily, "Ma'am, there are some things I can't do anything about."

"I know you can't. Nobody can. That's why I'm going back to Montreal."

She walked quickly around the house the way she had come. Watching her move out of sight, Verne reflected that wanting a wife died hard in a man. He had three days to change her mind.

Strangely, he slept well that night. He was up in the early morning, with the smell of bacon and eggs and coffee filling the house. When Christine entered the kitchen, he knew by her clear calm smile that she'd also slept well. Boulet, he noticed, ate silently, but their glances locked once and Verne's jaw hardened with the resolve of his will. Let the man bait him as he pleased, but there'd be no fight.

An hour later the coach was loaded and ready to go. Helping Christine in, Verne held her small gloved hand longer than he needed to. "Ma'am," he said gravely, "the only natives of this country are the Indians, and youngsters under ten. We're all immigrants and we all got used to it. This country's only ten years old."

He waited for understanding, a smile, anything. Instead, her face clouded and she seated herself in the coach with lowered eyes. Verne sighed, swung away from the steps, climbed up to the box and took the reins from the hostler's son. The kid had his mother's bright open face and his father's red hair, and Verne had to repress the impulse to rumple the carroty mop. The kid wouldn't like it; he was nearly twelve, nearly a man. Verne smacked him on the knee instead.

"Thanks, Jimmy. See you next trip."

The kid climbed down, and a moment later Ernie took his place beside Verne. "All set. Let 'er go."

They made god time for the second day, and the settlement of Red Deer Crossing, snuggled in the valley on the river's south side, came into sight an hour early. Verne hauled the coach to a dust-swirling stop in front of the inn, thinking, Boulet'll have to find something else to make an issue of tonight.

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A wagon and team stood near the inn, and a man and woman with three young children eagerly watched the coach halt. The woman, Verne guesed, would be the Wallaces' daughter, and the two boys, in knee pants and frilled blouses, the girl in a gingham pinafore, would be the grandchildren they'd come to count.

WHEN Verne climbed from the box, Mrs. Wallace's bonneted head was bobbing out the window and the air was alive with greetings. Ernie and the hostler put the steps in place and Verne opened the door. Mr. and Mrs. Wallace shook hands with him and thanked him for a pleasant trip. trip.

Christine followed them from the coach, and her carefully averted eyes killed Verne's hastily assembled speech. He watched her pick her way toward the inn through the Wallace's milling brood of adults and children, saw her smile at the little girl with the straw-colored braids, saw her impulsively, hungrily pick her up.

It didn't matter, he knew, that the Wallace's saw. Beyond a friendly gesture, it had no meaning for them. But when Christine was putting the little girl down, facing the coach across thirty feet of dusty pebbled ground, she looked into Verne's shrewdly understanding gaze over the youngster's head.

Painful color washed into her face. She wrenched her eyes away, and her slender hurrying back disappeared into the inn. Verne shut the door of the empty coach with a new buoyancy. She would have looked at any other man without embarrassment; he knew it. It left him thinking jubilantly, now, if she'll only learn the ways of the country!

Boulet had disappeared into the inn's beer parlor and Verne thought, he's thirsty, maybe, but not a fool. He won't get drunk as long as the thing's unsettled. He unharnessed the horses and turned them loose in the corral, then went into the inn and washed up. He ate supper with Ernie and the hostler in the empty dining room, and asked Ernie casually about Christine.

"Miss Rourke?" Ernie's face held studied disinterest. "She ate earlier. I saw her going upstairs. Guess she went to her room."

Verne finished his coffee, went outside, and sat on one of the chairs in front of the inn. Maybe Christine would come out for a breath of air. The evening wore on, and darkness fell. The constantly opening door of the beer parlor to his right threw shafts of light across the planks of the inn's verandah.

He took little notice of the beer parlor's traffic until a figure loomed over his chair. His eyes climbed swiftly from belt buckle to black shirt and leather vest, black neckerchief knotted at the throat, and his muscles instinctively bunched. Boulet reached forward, movement of hand blurred in the dark, and Verne lunged to his feet. Dazed, he found himself challenging the man's back and listening to low rasping laughter, and his face went hot in the darkness.

Boulet had simply reached out and flicked the tails of Verne's shoestring tie. With clenched hands, Verne watched him enter the inn. The little impudent gesture galled him. It said forcefully what Boulet wanted him to know: I'm playing with you, kid, but I'll be through playing soon.

Verne didn't sit down in the chair again. It was eleven o'clock, and he wouldn't see Christine now. He climbed the stairs to his small airless room and sat on the bed. He took off a boot and dropped it. She'd stayed in her room to avoid him. He took off the other boot and gave it a savage kick.

He woke in the morning with a sense of smothering panic. They'd reach Battle River tonight, and there'd be only one more day after that. He dressed hurriedly and went downstairs. Christine sat alone at a table in the dining room, and he strode over.

"Ma'am, I'd like to talk to you. Would you mind if I ate breakfast with you?" Without waiting for an answer, he pulled out a chair.

Boots clumped up behind him and Ernie said worriedly at his elbow, "The left wheel horse took sick last night, Verne. Can't get him on his feet this morning. We'll have to go get a replacement. They're all out to pasture, Ralph says."

Now, Verne thought, sickened, of all times! He sighed, then said soberly to Christine, "Excuse me, ma'am," and followed Ernie from the dining room.

The replacement delayed them a half hour,

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and he had no chance to speak to her in the flurry of harnessing and loading that followed. The sun was getting high when the stage-coach rocked onto the ferry for the river crossing. The craft nosed into the berth on the north bank and hoofs and wheels thundered from wood into soft sand as he pressed the horses up the incline and onto the flat straight road to Battle River.

Again they arrived ahead of schedule, and Verne stood by the team, stroking noses and patting sweaty necks. McLeod, he reckoned, had the best teams in the Territories. He moved around to the coach and helped unload, halting to watch Christine cross the dusty yard into the log house. Harried anew by a sense of panic, he appealed to Ernie.

"Look, will you keep an eye on the unharnessing. I'd like to—"

"Sure, Verne. Go on, git."

He walked swiftly toward the house and crossed the verandah. Christine stood forlornly in the parlor, and it didn't matter that Boulet was there, lighting his pipe. Verne's brisk firm steps carried him to her and he whisked off his hat.

"Miss Rourke, I'd like to see you a minute. Right now."

"I won't change my mind, Mr. Jessup!"

There was, he saw, no point in arguing, not right then. Maybe later, when she'd rested, had supper. He wheeled and walked swiftly to the door, aware of the match suspended above Boulet's pipe, while his cold impersonal glance probed curiously.

Verne stepped from the veranda into the reddening sunlight, and stood with shoulders hunched. The voices of Ernie and the hostler, shouting back and forth over the creak and jingle of gear, seemed muted, distant. Verne was suddenly tired. The last three days had been telling on him, and now there was no buoyancy to bolster up his weariness.

He turned at the sound of sudden running footsteps in the house. He was facing the door when Christine stumbled through it. Her blue straw bonnet was crooked, and a strand of hair was loose. She wouldn't look at him. Tears made her eyes seem enormous. She dipped into her reticule, and the hand that reappeared with a handkerchief was shaking.

VERNE stepped back onto the low veranda with a strange leaden feeling in his legs. Christine scrubbed her mouth with the handkerchief, and the unpleasant cloud in his mind crystalized with the force of a horse's kick.

There'd been no one in the parlor but Christine and Boulet. Verne caught her wrists, and his quiet mounting rage unsteadied his voice. "Boulet—" For her sake he didn't repeat it. He knew that she'd been kissed in the way of the frontier, and that was enough. He insisted shortly, "It was Boulet, wasn't it?"

"No!" She saw he didn't believe that. "It doesn't matter. It's not worth fighting over."

He wasn't listening. Boulet'd found the chink in his armor. Christine followed him, distraught, clutching his sleeve, and he put her hand away and crossed the doorsill. The parlor was empty. He went through into the kitchen.

"Dinner's not until seven," the hostler's wife said briskly.

He wasn't in the kitchen, and Verne went outside. Boulet leaned against the barnyard fence, hat on the ground nearby, rolled-up sleeves showing thick capable forearms. If there'd been no memory of Christine wiping off Boulet's kiss, Verne might have quailed. As it was, he tossed his own hat away and loosened his shirt cuffs without changing stride.

Boulet shifted his weight from the fence to his braced legs. Verne feinted, with three feet still between them, drawing Boulet forward. His right fist smashed into Boulet's face and the impact snapped the fence under Boulet's staggering weight.

They plunged to the ground in the barnyard, with chickens scattering wildly. Rolling in furious battle, Boulet's use of knees and thumbs changed Verne's outraged attack to winded painful defense.

Christine and Ernie stood at the broken fence, and Ernie's voice came heavily in answer to Christine's sharp cry of, "Do something!"

"Ma'am, it wouldn't fix a thing, believe me. Not a thing."

Pinned on his back, Verne felt a crushing weight on his ribs. He fought to bring up a

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knee. The ringing in his ears swelled, and the spinning horizon faded into the smell of sweat and dust. The hands on his throat, the pressure of fingers, brought deep bitter regret, not because he'd lost the driver's job to Boulet, but because he'd meant to make the man eat dust for Christine to see, and he'd failed.

A starched petticoat frill brushed his face. Boulet cried out as a wrenching spasm lifted his big frame from Verne's chest. It was the second Verne needed to gather up his knees and topple Boulet from him. He got to his feet and swung a fist just as Boulet lumbered up. Boulet staggered under the driving blow and Verne hit him again. The mule skinner fell, dragged himself up, and fell again under Verne's waiting fists.

He rolled over on his face and lay still. It was, Verne knew, the last he'd heard of the mule skinner. Verne sucked in great breaths, his shirt tattered, dirt clinging to his face. He stumbled to the fence. Christine, doubled over it, sobbed into her hands. Verne knew he wasn't fit to touch her, but he couldn't help himself. He took her in his arms.

"What did you do to him?" he asked.

Her face was pressed tightly against the ribbons of his shirt. She said tearfully, "I'm so ashamed. I stuck him in the shoulder with my hat pin!"

Verne lifted his startled gaze to meet hers. A wide, joyful grin spread across his face. She wasn't just learning; she'd learned.

He said humbly, "I don't believe you'd have done it for anyone else, Christine." He stumbled, then plunged in. "It'll take about six months to put up that poplar cabin, which is as fast as I can pay for it. But a man and his wife could put up with a boarding house in town for six months, couldn't they?"

Christine made soft little noises into his shirt. She was crying again. No, she was laughing.

Both, then, but it really didn't matter, because her nod was firm and clear.

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The Drifters

by ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

SHEEP WAS A fighting word in the Bend . . . but Steve Murdock and his beautiful partner Carla were spoiling for a fight

PART ONE

THE norther whispered out at sundown and left a strange coppery half light hanging in the sky, where a haze of alkali dust was suspended and caught the last rays of the sun. On the darkening earth the campfire old Pablo Ordonez had built beside the chuck wagon gleamed, and toward this beacon the sheep straggled.

Now that the campfire was in sight to mark the bed grounds, the sheep managed to feed. As if in fulfillment of that promise given the meek, they found sustenance—three thousand head of them—where a hundred cows might have gone hungry.

Steve Murdock, who disliked sheep with all the ingrained instincts of the cattlemen, took sober and thoughtful note of the way they foraged. He and the other three men had brought this flock down all the dry and dusty miles from the high, windy New Mexican plains. The two young Mexican herders, Manuel and Diego, walked, carrying canteens and shepherd's slings, and shouting at the dogs. One step higher in the trail organization was old Pablo, the cook, who dozed on the jolting Studebaker wagon behind a

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pair of sturdy Spanish mules. And Steve Murdock, still half-ashamed of becoming a sheepman, kept as best he could to windward, away from the dust and smell and blether, and rode a short-coupled cowpony named Castizo—which means "good breed."

Steve Murdock himself had the rangy look and the wildhearted and reckless spirit of the mustang breed, although his spirit had suffered. He had been far down on his luck when Hugo Von Wettner met him in Socorro. Their acquaintance was brief.

Von Wettner, a middle-aged man with a slight Austrian accent, reminded Steve that President Cleveland's abolition of the wool tariff had dropped the bottom out of the sheep market; he could buy three thousand Merino ewes, already bred, for a dollar a head. He wanted a partner who could invest a little capital, and could drive the sheep to the Big Bend of Texas. Von Wettner would go on in advance, find range, and see that there was no trouble.

The last word brought a grin to Steve Murdock's lean face. Sheep in the Bend? He thought of Jim Harney—genial Jim, with the soft, grasping hands and the opulent, gold-toothed smile.

Sheep in the Bend? Steve's smile became a chuckle.

"What's funny?" asked Von Wettner.

"Know anything about that country?" Steve countered.

Von Wettner glanced over his shoulder, his pale blue eyes fleetingly apprehensive. "Enough," he said, fingering his whisky glass. "My father came through it from Mexico after Maximilian was killed, in '67. It struck him as good sheep country, and he knew sheep. He didn't live to come back. I know that every other section down there is state land. Most of the cattlemen own only a few alternate sections, plus water rights. They graze a lot more, but they have no legal claim to it. The plats are available in the county abstract office. I'll look them up. I'll go by the map."

Steve listened with surprise and respect. Von Wettner planned to be a "drifter," owning no land, moving his sheep from one range to another. There had been drifters before, with cattle, but this man had a new angle—a legitimate angle, perhaps, if he went by the map and grazed only on state land. Of course Jim Harney and the Cattlemen's Association would not consider it legitimate.

For that reason the proposition began to attract Steve Murdock. It has been three years since Harney had frozen him out; it had taken him three years, at cowhand's wages, to save a thousand dollars toward a fresh start. And a man couldn't buy many cows with a thousand dollars.

"Half the outlaws in Texas and Mexico hole up in the Bend. Like the Ketchum boys and Mitch Turner. They deal in wet stock."

"Wet stock?"

"The kind that crosses the Rio Grande by moonlight. There are some big ranches in Coahuila, too. It could work both ways, but when I was there they picked on the Mexicans, mostly." He rolled a cigarette and studied Von Wettner. "Mitch and the Ketchum boys won't be interested in sheep at a dollar a head. The coyotes and lobo wolves and panthers will be. So will the Rosario Land & Development Company."

"What's that?"

Steve's wide mouth tightened. "That's Jim Harney. He owns a store and a bank, and he runs the Cattlemen's Association. Ever see one of those devilfishes with eight arms and mouths all over? That's Harney. He loves money like some men love whisky or pretty girls. He grabbed up most of the poor-boy outfits three years ago—mine included. By now, I figure he's chewing on the big ones."

"I don't owe him anything," Von Wettner said.

"I owe him plenty!" Steve answered. He raised his glass. "And if a few hundred dollars and the trail-driving job will swing the deal, you've got yourself a partner!"

ON THIS evening when the norther lay down and the blowing sand stopped stinging the backs of their necks, they had been on the trail nearly two months. Steve had learned a lot about the sheep. Of all God's creatures . . . he thought, in many a moment of utter exasperation, and then gave up, powerless to express his resentment of their timid, perverse and completely stupid natures.

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His experience had been with cattle. Sheep moved only in the mass, governed entirely by herd instinct, following the bell wethers. A longhorn cow would fight savagely to defend her calf; sheep in danger only huddled in glassy-eyed, hypnotic terror, and waited for the end.

Still, as he brought them down from Socorro, making a slow six or seven miles a day if feed were good for night and nooning, the sheep at times woke a grudging, half-humorous admiration in Steve Murdock. Out of their very stupidity and helplessness, they exacted a far greater degree of care and protection from man then any other domesticated beast had ever done. They turned their masters into guides and nurses and midwives.

Steve rode where the campfire flickered, casting its shine on the wagon tarp, and consulted Pablo Ordonez. "I figure we're about fifteen, twenty miles from Rosario. I know this country pretty well, Pablo; we're coming close to my old stamping grounds. I'll ride to Rosario tonight and see how the land lies."

Pablo said, "Senor, it is more better if you take Manuel with you. Maybe there will be some kind of trouble in the town of Rosario."

Steve said, "Not everybody in Rosario is my friend. But I can take care of myself, Pablo. Let Manuel sleep."

He rode southeastward by moonlight. He was a tall man, flat and narrow-hipped, mostly ribs and rawhide, and still under thirty. The country had shaped him. The suns and the sandstorms and freezing northers of Texas weathers were burned deep into the skin of his face, with its high cheekbones and angular, stubborn jaw. He was not handsome in any sense, but women sensed and liked his uncompromising, rugged masculinity.

Upon Steve Murdock now was an odd feeling of urgency. The Rosario Land & Development Company had wiped Steve Murdock out—in a legal fashion, and according to a pattern that was both common and clear. The foreclosure was Jim Harney's right, if any man had the right to forget consideration and sympathy. The blacklisting that followed when Steve Murdock tried to fight back was something else. It called for revenge.

He rode through a rocky gap, and reined Castizo to blow while he rested his saddle and made a cigarette. At the bottom of the hill was a white ribbon of stage road, and from somewhere far to the east, beyond the bend that hid the town, a locomotive whistle lifted its long and lonesome cry into the night, like the lament of a coyote.

Steve drew thoughtfully on the cigarette. The railroad had been new when he left, and he could only guess at the changes it had wrought. The town was growing, and Jim Harney's empire would have grown with it. He wondered about the men who had been afraid to stand together at a time when Harney could have been stopped. What had happened to the bigger operators like Mase Smith and Ed Valentine and Bill Crenshaw? Or Don Miguel Arnaldo, who had helped run the Indians out of the Bend before setting up his Luna Media ranch down near the river?

Then, for no reason, and because a man needs no reason to remember a pretty girl, he thought of Katie Evans. She'd be about twenty-two now, and probably quite a woman. Hell, he thought, she was as much woman as any man could handle, at seventeen! But he would always remember Katie first as a freckled, red-headed tomboy, running loose around Rosario while her father trapped coyotes and lobo wolves off the ranches.

And Steve remembered her later, in the season of her beautiful blossoming, when the good ladies of the Methodist church were saying it was a pity she had no mother to guide her, and that if she didn't get married quickly she'd be ruined. I'd have married Katie, Steve thought, and then had a qualifying doubt. Maybe I'd have married Katie, if she'd had me. And wouldn't I have had hell worrying about supporting a wife when Harney put the squeeze on me.

HE RODE on, turning eastward along the stage road and seeing a new windmill standing stilt-legged against the sky ahead. Harney again. This was the original Two Sevens ranch; the windmill was a sort of monument to Harney's success. Then Steve heard steel tires crunching the gravel, and a tarpaulin-arched ranch wagon lumbered up out of a rocky draw and bulked in the moonlight, coming toward him. Nobody but Kyle

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Fraser ever drove such a team—a big, blaze-faced black stepping alongside a small, sturdy Indian paint horse.

"Kyle!" Steve shouted out of the lonesomeness of three years away from the people he knew. "Kyle, you baldheaded old son-of-a-gun!"

The wagon came on, but there was no answer. That was strange. Steve had gotten his start riding for Kyle, down on the Rio Grande; he had bought land adjoining Kyle's Rafter F outfit, and Ellie Fraser was like a mother to him. Still, this was off the road Kyle would normally travel. He thought, maybe Kyle lost everything, even his wagon team. He pulled rein, and then the moonlight showed him the girl on the wagon seat.

She was too small, too slender to be Ellie. She was too stylishly dressed, with a flat-brimmed straw hat instead of the sunbonnet Ellie wore. The hat was tied down by a veil that framed the smooth white oval of her face. What was more, she held a saddle gun across her knees, the moonlight glinting on its blue steel barrel.

"I can shoot this gun!" she warned in a low, scared voice. "What do you want?"

"Well, I don't want to get shot," Steve said banteringly. "It happens I'm a friend of Kyle Fraser. I thought this was his outfit. It used to be."

The wagon stopped. Harness creaked, and one of the horses blew. "Mr. Fraser," the girl said acidly, "is in the back of the wagon, drunk! He was supposed to meet my train. When he didn't come, I hired a livery hack. We found him in the wagon yard, sleeping it off. Please let me by!" the girl finished. "I'm in a hurry to get to Mr. Fraser's ranch."

"On this road? This would take you all the way to El Paso. You should have turned left a mile out of town. Besides, it's a long drive. You'd better wait till morning."

"But I can't wait! I'll turn back to the road."

Ellie had kinfolk in East Texas, and maybe this girl was one of them. She didn't know much about handling a wagon and team. Steve Murdock rode alongside and yanked the brake handle, notching it deep.

"I'll sober Kyle up for you, lady," he said. "Won't take long."

"Please just leave me—" she began, but she couldn't release the brake.

Steve rode back to the endgate without listening. Judging from the sound and smell there, Kyle had really tied one on. Steve leaned inside the wagon and struck a match. The match went out, burning Steve's fingers; he swore under his breath, not at the pain, but with surprise at what he had seen, and scratched another match on the endgate.

Kyle Fraser had never owned any money beyond the sum laboriously scraped together each spring to pay on the mortgage Jim Harney held against the Rafter F. But now he lay in a profusion of money, like a miser fallen asleep caressing his love. Steve lifted a saddle blanket that covered Fraser's legs, and saw two canvas sacks. One had come untied; it was the cornucopia from which spilled a scatter of bundled greenbacks and loose gold and silve coins. Both sacks were plainly labeled FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF ROSARIO. Beside them was enough dynamite to blow the wagon sky high.

Steve reached into the wagon, caught the small man by his jumper collar and one leg, and heaved the inert weight across his shoulders. Stalking toward the windmill he saw a new four-strand barbed wire fence, and disliked Jim Harney all the more because of his hatred for the cruel wire. But the yellow clay bulk of a tank dam loomed beyond. Steve dragged Kyle unceremoniously under the wire, lifted him again, and heaved him bodily into the tank.

The liquid splash and the startled yell were simultaneous. Kyle went under. He came up swimming for his life in water that wasn't more than knee deep, then scrambled out on the bank spitting black mud and blacker invective.

"Damn you!" he snapped. Then his vision cleared. "Hey! Steve Murdock!"

"You're a fine sight, Kyle! I've seen you polluted, but this is the first time I've seen you orey-eyed."

"Want me to catch pneumonia?" Kyle puffed, crawling out again. "Besides, I'm not drunk. I only had about three or four."

"And the last one was loaded. Who'd you do your drinking with?"

"I don't remember." He shook his head,

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obviously a painfully unwise thing to do, and groaned. "Wait a minute. It was Oscar Poe. Steve, Harney's after my place!"

"It figures. He's after everybody's place, if I know him. Who's Oscar Poe?"

"He keeps Harney's books—works in the bank. He's a pale, skinny cuss in a celluloid collar. Wait a minute, and I'll recollect everything! Oscar was advising me to sell, and Big Lewis came by the bar and told me the same thing. He said Harney'll foreclose on me if I don't. Like hell he will! I'm paid up currently and I'm in good shape. I leased some grass for cash a few weeks back." He wiped water from his face and squinted up at Steve. "Do you know that Big Lewis is going into politics? He's married now; he married that little Katie Evans."

"He did what?" Steve asked sharply. Then he grabbed Kyle by the shoulders and shook him roughly. "Never mind the gossip. What about tonight? You went out with Big and Oscar Poe?"

"Just Poe. I went to Poe's room at the hotel, and had a drink there, and told him Harney can go plumb to hell. I'm a small operator, but Harney can't scare me!"

Katie married! Steve thought heavily. Did all right for herself, marrying a comer like Big Lewis, Harney's right hand man! Yes, sir, she sure did all right for herself, and I hope she's happy.

"Now, wait," Kyle said. "It's coming back to me now. Oscar Poe doesn't like Harney any more than I do. Know what he wanted me to do? He asked me why I didn't get even with Harney by busting in and robbing the bank."

"Interesting," Steve said. "Did you rob it?"

"Of course I didn't rob it!" Kyle said indignantly. "I went back to the wagon yard, and —hey, I forgot what I went to town for. I've got to meet the nine-forty train from San Antone!"

"Don't work up a sweat," Steve said. "It's nearly twelve, and she's in the wagon, fit to be tied. Kin of Ellie's?"

"No. Sister—half-sister, that is—of the man I leased the range to, a sheep man named Von Wettner."

"Hugo Von Wettner? Why, he's my partner, Kyle!"

Kyle Frased shivered and shook his head. "*Was* your partner, maybe. Last week he was out in the hills near the Four Corners, using a surveyor's transit, and somebody shot him in the back! He hasn't been conscious since then. If he's still alive when I get that girl to the ranch, it'll be a sure-enough miracle!"

THE lonesome night wind was freshening, blowing through Kyle Fraser's wet clothes, making him shiver as he talked. He explained that the team had come back to the home corral, stepping on the dragging reins; and he had found Von Wettner lying in the bed of the wagon, behind the seat, bleeding his life away. There were cactus thorns in his hands and knees; no telling how far he had crawled, or what superhuman effort it had taken him to climb into the wagon before he lost consciousness.

"I rode out and backtracked the wagon as best I could in the rocks," Kyle said, and found Von Wettner's transit. Must have happened a couple of miles from Candelilla. If he could have made it to Marlin Dubose's store, they might have stopped the blood in time. I found a name in his notebook with a name and address: Carla Von Wettner, Fredericksburg. I sent her a telegram as soon as I could get to town."

"Who killed him?" Steve asked.

"How can you tell? Four outfits come together there, counting mine. Three of 'em hate sheep. Besides, he could have been shot by some outlaw."

Steve remembered business more pressing than trying to guess who had shot Von Wettner. He said, "Kyle, they framed you tonight. Poe, or all of them, framed you so it would look like you robbed the bank. There are two sacks of money in the wagon, in case you didn't know it."

"Money?" Kyle said stupidly. "I never went near the damned bank!"

"Never mind the alibis," Steve said. "Get going. I want you to hightail it for the ranch. They'll have the law after you any time now."

He seized Kyle's arm and hustled him down the tank dam. At the barbed wire, Carla Von Wettner was waiting, distraught with anxiety. Steve said, "Head for the ranch and stay there. What's the dynamite for?"

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Kyle bristled. "Whose business is that but mine? I'm building a string of fence. I have to blast some big rocks."

"What's Poe's room number at the hotel?"

"I don't know. We went up the back stairs and it was the first room on the left. Look here, Steve—you stay out of this!"

But Steve forced Kyle to mount to the seat of the wagon and take the reins. "I'll take the money, and the dynamite too," he said. "It wouldn't look good for you to have dynamite, if they blasted the safe."

"Now why would anybody try to lay a bank robbery on *me?*" Kyle inquired plaintively. "Poe talked about it, but I know damn well I didn't have anything to do with it. I went back to the wagon yard."

"And then he planted the money on you," Steve said. "Harney's after your place, isn't he? If you landed in jail on what looked like an open-and-shut charge of bank robbery, he'd get it, wouldn't he?"

Steve was back to the endgate, leaving Kyle spluttering and shivering in his wet clothes. He gathered up the spilled money, and put the canvas sacks and the dynamite in his saddlebags. Then he left the ranch wagon to its slower devices, and rode fast for Rosario.

There was more to the town than he remembered. Even the cottonwoods on the side street by the hotel had grown taller. Steve turned that way, and tethered Castizo where the shadows were deep. As yet he had no plan of action; he would begin by finding Oscar Poe.

His slicker had been tied behind his saddle for a long time; the last piddling rain had been months ago. It had been a long time, too, since he had worn the cartridge belt and holster that were wrapped in the slicker. Now he strapped the gun belt around his middle.

He put on the slicker for disguise, pulling his hat low and drawing up the red bandanna he wore for a neckerchief so it covered his chin and mouth. The money sacks he tied to his belt, beneath the slicker. Nobody moved along the moonlit street, and nobody saw him turn into the back yard of the hotel. He went up the outside stairs like a prowling cat.

First room on the left. The knob yielded, the door opened to show a patch of moonlight from a single dingy window. He paused, hearing a man's deep, regular breathing. He closed the door behind him and spoke Oscar Poe's name.

The bed creaked. Poe jerked upright, telltale guilt in his sharp intake of breath. His voice was scared. "Who's there?"

"Bank examiner, Oscar. Light the lantern."

"Look here, you can't fool me! Bank examiners don't come around like this. You get out of my room, or I'll—"

"Oscar," Steve said gravely, "you won't do a thing. There have been so many crooks lately, us bank examiners have to work around the clock. Light the lantern, and get your duds on." He thumbed back the hammer of his .44, and it made a beautifully ominous click. "If you fool with me, I'll shoot you just as fast as I'd shoot a coyote!"

POE'S bare feet brushed the floor hesitantly; everything in the man was shrinking from this encounter.

"Never mind the collar and tie, Oscar," Steve said. "Just pick up the lantern and this valise, and don't forget your keys."

He prodded Poe with the gun. They went down the back stairs and around the shaded corner. The bank was a one-story adobe flanked on one side by a barbershop and on the other by a hardware store. Oscar fumbled with his keys, but Steve reached past him and turned the knob without using them. The lock had been jimmied.

The bobbing circle of lantern light fell on a clock hanging on the side wall, its brass pendulum glinting as it swung. It showed the big, cheaply-constructed safe that stood on casters against the back wall, its door open, a litter of papers and a sprinkling of small change on the floor in front of it. Kyle Fraser's battered old hat lay there. Steve remembered the band of rattlesnake skin on it, and knew the hat was planted evidence. Beside it lay the heavy knobbed handle of the safe, and several fragments of broken metal from the shattered lock.

Steve watched Poe out of the corner of his eye as he stooped to pick up the knobbed safe handle. Poe was nervous and overwrought; he telegraphed every move. He put

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Katie said, "Big has always been jealous of you, Steve."

the lantern carefully on top of the broken safe, and as Steve examined the litter on the floor he could see Poe's shadow across it. The shadow shortened as Poe gathered himself and sprang.

Steve ducked lower, dropping to his hands and knees, making the bank clerk overshoot his mark. Poe landed on the bigger man's shoulders and grabbed at his gun hand, but his timing was poor, and the momentum carried him across Steve's body. He sprawled on the floor, and they came up together, fighting for possession of the gun.

Then Steve swung the safe handle. It came around in a short, vicious arc, its knobbed end striking solidly above Oscar's left ear. His eyes went blank, his contorted face smoothed into open-mouthed, idiotic peacefulness, and his knees folded. He smeared his cheek along the gritty floor.

Steve bent over him, momentarily alarmed. But Oscar wasn't dead. He had a lump growing and purpling under his thin hair, and a sizeable welt was beginning to ooze dark blood. He would be unconscious long enough for Steve to smoke a cigarette and make his plans for the next move.

The tobacco smoke tasted good. If everything went right, his chance meeting would have saved Kyle Fraser from certain disaster. He listened to the clock's loud rhythm while he studied the safe and the littered floor; he heard the clock strike one, and then carefully pinched out the cigarette butt and dropped it in his pocket, knowing what he was going to do. Kyle was a small operator; Steve Mur-

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dock would need the support of all the small operators before he got the sheep to the Bend. And by this time Kyle was well down the road with a girl who could swear to his whereabouts at this time of morning.

He placed the safe handle near Poe's head. The money bags and the greenbacks from Oscar's valise he restored to the safe, leaving the door open. He picked up Kyle's hat and went cautiously out the street door. When he came back, five minutes later, Kyle's hat was in his saddlebag, and Kyle's dynamite—all but the long-fused stick Steve carried—was in Oscar Poe's room. Oscar, he thought, would have a hard time explaining that.

He had to make certain that the clock was stopped, in case the blast failed to rouse the townspeople, because the recorded time of the explosion might figure importantly in Kyle's alibi. He set the hands forward five minutes, then picked up one of the steel fragments and threw it hard into the face of the clock. Glass shattered, tinkling on the floor. The pendulum rocked and then was still on dead center.

He removed the lantern to a safe distance and left it on the floor. Poe lay far enough from the safe; the blast would not likely do him further injury. Steve had to shut the safe door to a small crack into which he could wedge the dynamite. Then he lighted the fuse and went out the door in a hurry.

He turned Castizo down the side street and across the railroad tracks. When he was two blocks away the muffled roar of the blast sounded behind him, and he knew that at least the people in the Trail Driver's Hotel would hear it.

The Monterrey dancehall bar was still doing business. Steve bought a drink there, casually inquired the time, and set his own watch. Then he rode back into the main street. There were lights in the bank, and a knot of excitedly talking men at the doorway. He swung off the horse there, just in time to see the men carrying Oscar Poe's limp form out of the bank and into the lobby of the hotel. Steve Murdock was only one of a dozen curious onlookers who followed.

THEY laid Oscar out on the lobby floor, and Sheriff Arch Kennedy squatted. "Fritz," he told the hotel clerk, "you'd better go get Doc Moseley. Better tell Doc to bring his buggy, so I can cart Oscar over to the jail."

Fritz Hurlburt mopped his bald head nervously. "You think he ought to be in jail, Arch?" he asked. "You know he works for Jim Harney, and I was thinking maybe you ought to ask Jim what he thinks."

"I don't care who Poe works for!" Kennedy said. "Not when he tries to rob the bank! Go get Doc, like I told you."

Then he saw Steve. "Hey, Murdock! When did you get back to this poor man's country?"

Steve grinned. "Tonight. Just rode in. What happened here?"

"There's been a little dynamite trouble at the bank. You didn't hear it?"

"Reckon I did. I was over at the Monterrey a little while ago, and it sounded like somebody fired off a double-barreled shotgun over this way."

The sheriff nodded. He leaned against the clerk's desk and made a cigarette, studying Steve. "Let's see, son. You left here about three years back, didn't you? You had some trouble with Harney."

"You could call it trouble. All he did was freeze me out, foreclose on me, and then blacklist me so I couldn't get a job."

"Well, that's Jim Harney. He's froze out a lot of people since then, too—he and this dry spell. This is a good country to be from, but a hell of a place to come back to. What are you doing now?"

"Sheep. I'm partners with a man named Von Wettner, who claims a man can get rich with sheep. He's down here looking for range. I just brought the sheep down from New Mexico."

"Are you plumb *loco?*" demanded the sheriff. "Haven't you heard what happened? Von Wettner got shot the other day!"

"Shot? Bad?"

"Bad enough to die, I'm afraid."

"Who did it? Von Wettner's as friendly as they come. He had no enemies that I ever heard of."

"No enemies? Listen, Murdock, he had nothing but enemies in this whole damn country, the minute he spoke just one word—*sheep!* Why, this country hates sheep! *I* hate sheep! I'm a peace officer. Sheep will make

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trouble. They're a threat to the peace of this community."

He went restlessly to the door, came back, and cast a scornful glance at Oscar Poe. Steve said, "If anybody makes trouble, Arch, it'll be the cattlemen. Not me. There's no law against sheep. There's a lot of free and open range in the Bend. I've got as much right to graze sheep on that land as another man has to run cattle on it." He faced Kennedy. "I've got the law on my side, and you know it!"

The sheriff glared. "Not me, you haven't! I try to be fair, but I don't see anything fair about bringing in a bunch of snot-nosed woollies to stink up the waterholes and eat the grass so short a prairie dog would starve! Where are they now?"

"Up the line fifteen or twenty miles. And mighty dry. How're the waterholes? What about Gavilan Draw?"

Buggy wheels rattled outside. Arch Kenneday walked toward the door. Over his shoulder, he said, "I don't know anything about the waterholes up that way, and I don't want to know. Better take those sheep back where they came from, and save both of us trouble."

Doc Moseley, a rotund, bespectacled little man who chewed tobacco incessantly, poked the lump on Poe's head with a pudgy professional finger, felt his pulse, and got to his feet.

"What hit him?" he asked.

The sheriff held out the safe handle. "I reckon this did. Is he hurt bad?"

"Concussion," Doc said, whittling another chew. "Abrasion. No fracture."

"He'll be all right in jail? I don't want him dying on my hands."

"He won't die. There's not much I can do for him now that your wife can't do. Tell her to put some cold compresses on his head, and try to keep him quiet when he comes to. I'll look at him then."

Kennedy hooked his hands under Poe's armpits, and they started out to the buggy. The sheriff looked at Steve again. "Take my advice," he said to Steve. "Sell out."

The buggy rattled away. Steve Murdock rode after it and saw it turn in at the jail on the courthouse square. He kept going slowly down the empty street toward the west, feeling the night wind cool on his face. He felt like a man who has done a long and eminently satisfying day's work.

Any way Steve looked at it, Jim Harney appeared to be behind tonight's attempt to frame Kyle Fraser, to turn his weakness for drink against him and make it impossible for him to hold onto his land in the Bend. In turning the frame-up against Harney's henchman, Steve had not only saved a friend, he also had dealt Jim Harney a blow.

But Arch Kennedy's stand was disconcerting. Steve had known the sheriff of old; he knew that money would never buy Arch, and that Jim Harney could never run the sheriff's office. Kennedy resented Harney, probably hated him cordially. But he also hated sheep.

The voters of the county were cattlemen. Add that to Arch Kennedy's personal dislike for sheep, and the drive to the Bend looked like a long, hard pull, uphill all the way.

ON THE second morning after Steve Murdock's eventful return to Rosario, Marlin Dubose sat smoking his pipe and using his field glasses under the brush-thatched arbor he had built on a small conical hill behind his store at Candelilla. The name suggested a town; there was no town anywhere down here.

Dubose owned a few sections of arid, rugged land that spread fanwise in a northwest direction from the trading post, where a clump of cottonwoods rustled their leaves over a cold-water spring.

When the scattered ranchmen of the Bend needed staples, they could drive distances varying from forty to a hundry miles to buy them in Rosario, or they could come to Candelilla and pay Dubose's slightly higher prices. Naturally, they outfitted mainly at Rosario —thus fattening Jim Harney's pocketbook— and depended on Dubose only for emergency needs.

Everybody said that Harney's capital was behind Dubose, who handled certain small stock deals for the Rosario Land & Development Company. At any rate, he prosepered in a small and cunning fashion suited to his small and cunning nature. He was not a man of great soul. Just past sixty, he had a thin ferret face, but his eyes lacked the ferret sharpness and were, instead, hollow and ex-

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traordinarily luminous, with the brightness of suffering long endured. His body, small and wasted, was laced into a corset-like leather sheath that supported his spine.

He could ride a horse if Maria, his comfortably fat Mexican wife, helped him into the saddle; he walked painfully, and made better progress in the store by employing a squatting, long-armed crawl. In everything, he had that hypersensitivity and the feeling of persecution so often found in the malformed.

Dubose's store and living quarters stood just below the hill, where the cottonwoods and a long gallery across the front of the building made shade for summertime. Behind the store, on rising ground, was a forlorn little graveyard where broken bottle glass—Maria's pagan touch—outlined four graves, and a pile of fresh earth marked the new one that was waiting.

Hugo Von Wettner was dead. Doc Moseley, coming by on his way back to Rosario, had brought the word yesterday afternoon. Marlin Dubose, who felt a certain morbid proprietorship toward the little cemetery, had been forehanded enough to press into service a Mexican who was vaguely related to Maria, and the grave was dug.

Just now, Maria was tending store. The Ketchum boys, Bud and Curly, had ridden up earlier. Their sweat-streaked horses were tied under the cottonwoods. Maybe, Dubose told himself, it wasn't sweat, but Rio Grande water. The Ketchum boys sat on the gallery eating sardines and crackers, and spearing green gage plums from the can with their skinning knives. By tacit understanding, they expected Dubose to warn them if dust showed on any of the three roads that converged on Candelilla.

It pleased Dubose that the Ketchum boys, being straight and strong, were in any manner dependent upon him. He was proud, too, that he served all the ranchers in the Bend with news and gossip, although he also fancied himself tight-mouthed and wise in the ways of silence. Sometimes, when the pain gnawed, he threw things at Maria and called her vile names in two languages. Then he climbed laboriously to this little arbor, where the bigness of the land made him feel like a god who could watch mere mortals come and go.

Dust was stirring now, not on one road, but on two. Dubose directed his glasses toward the way to Gunsight Pass, and saw Kyle Fraser's mismated team and what looked like two women on the seat with Kyle. Then he swung the glasses southwestward, and picked up two insignificant dots that were horsemen.

By their sombreros, he knew these for Don Miguel Arnello and his *segundo,* Juan Flores, riding up from the Luna Media ranch. Dubose watched them with a twinge of envy. Don Miguel was the oldest white settler in the Bend, and the Luna Media was the largest land holding except Jim Harney's expanding empire. In good times, Don Miguel was worth a lot money.

But Dubose's envy was not based on wealth. A cripple who suffered and crawled, he was jealous of Don Miguel's large and placid content. It showed now in the leisurely manner of the *ranchero's* riding, with Juan Flores keeping always a little respectful distance behind. Don Miguel was not coming, on horseback, to buy supplies, but only to hear the news, and perhaps to enjoy a bottle of beer. For him, there was nothing, good or bad, that would not wait until tomorrow; he even shrugged off this long drought.

Dubose lowered the glasses and smiled his secret, malicious smile. This dry spell isn't half the trouble he's got coming! Wait till Jim Harney gets ready to buck the Luna Media. That'll be something to see!

Kyle Fraser's wagon was now rolling through a greasewood flat two miles away. Dubose glanced at it, then turned the glasses toward the Painted Hills, and whistled with surprise. This was his busy day. There was a horseman on the road from Rosario, and it looked like Sheriff Arch Kennedy.

"I'd better tell the Ketchum boys," Dubose said aloud.

He climbed the stairs laboriously and then sat on the gallery floor, panting with exertion and hugging his knees. "You boys know who shot the sheepherder?"

"Now, that depends," Bud said carefully. "Anybody paying a bounty for sheepherder's ears this season?"

"The Cattlemen's Association might," said Dubose. He paused to savor his words. "Arch

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Kennedy's coming down the road. Thought maybe you'd want to study out an alibi, because he's probably coming to ask some questions about Von Wettner."

Bud reached for his hat. He said, "Funny thing, Marlin, but Curly and I just remembered we got a couple of *chiquitas* waiting for us over in Boquillas this evening." He winked at his brother. "Ask them where we were the day Von Wettner got shot."

Curly injected a note of business. "What's the price on beef steers this week—prime fours and long threes?"

"You know what the price is," Dubose said sulkily. "Ten dollars a head."

"And before their tails are dry, Harney gets sixteen or better!" Curly said. "You tell him he'll have to fork over twelve bucks a head for the next bunch, or we stop doing business with him. It's too chancy."

Dubose only grunted, but he watched thoughtfully as they went to their horses and rode unhurriedly through the scrub mesquite toward the river. He knew a few things about the Ketchum boys; he knew things about everybody.

KYLE FRASER had driven up more to get the women out of the house than anything else, and he said that Carla intended shipping her brother's body back to Fredericksburg for burial. The women were in the store, now, with Maria. Juan Flores sat modestly on the steps. Dubose would have liked to talk with Juan, because the Mexican, like himself, was a firm believer in every buried treasure and lost mine legend that had ever been told in the Bend. But the other men sat at a bare pine table on the gallery, and Marlin Dubose couldn't afford to miss the conversation. As Arch Kennedy talked, he moved his wet beer bottle along the dusty table top, making concentric circles.

"So I took Oscar to jail and had Doc examine him again when he came to. You'd say it looked like an open-and-shut case against Oscar, but Jim Harney went his bail, and believes the story Oscar told. It's a mighty strange one. Oscar says he was framed. He says you got drunk, Kyle, and bragged about how you were going to rob the bank."

"He's a liar!" Kyle growled. "Sure, I got drunk, all right. He helped me get drunk. But—"

"I said Harney believed him, not me. His story doesn't hang together at all, except in one way." Kennedy's dust-colored brows pulled together thoughtfully. "The tall man he says pulled a gun on him and took him to the bank fits Steve Murdock's description perfectly. And Steve's back."

Kyle didn't bat an eyelash. "If Steve's back, you can be damn sure Harney's out to get him all over again!" He squared his shoulders. "Well, if Harney sent you down here to arrest me, who's holding you back? Have you got a warrant?"

"I don't arrest people on hearsay, Kyle. I came down here to talk to Miss Von Wettner, and to ask you a few questions. That's all. But did you know Murdock's handling Von Wettner's sheep? I figure he's doing it just to get back at Harney. And," Kennedy added bitterly, "it'll probably bust things wide open! It'll raise hell in the Bend."

"Kyle," Dubose broke in eagerly, "why did you lease that range to Von Wettner in the first place?"

"It's my land!" Kyle snapped. "I needed the money. And what the hell is it to you, anyhow?"

The sheriff frowned over his beer, listening, wondering how near things were to an explosion in the Bend. Placid Don Miguel stirred, disturbed by the argument, and lifted one shoulder lazily.

"It's a time of change, *amigos*," he said in his musical voice. "I do not like fence. Last week one of my best blooded mares was cut on the barbed wire. But me, I know there will soon be no more open range, and a *ranchero* must own the land he grazes, and build a fence around it. Then, if he does not like sheep, he can keep them out." Again he lifted the shrugging shoulder. "Me, I do not like sheep, either. But east of the Rio Pecos the fences and the sheep have already come, and they will come here, too. It is a big country. Is there not enough room for everybody?"

Arch Kennedy sighed, knowing there never would be enough room for people like Jim Harney. Don Miguel was friendly and easy-going, but Harney was different.

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He asked, "Kyle, what was Von Wettner doing with the surveying outfit?"

"He was running surveys on the plats according to the county abstract map," Kyle said truculently. "He aimed to keep his sheep on the leased grass, or on state land. It was a pretty smart trick, and it was legal."

"Maybe," Dubose said derisively, and Kyle glared at him.

The women were coming out of the store now, Maria following Carla and Ellie, smiling her lazy wide-toothed smile. Arch Kennedy got heavily to his feet. He hadn't found out much. The murderer of Hugo Von Wettner was still at large, that crazy affair at the bank was making the sheriff's office look silly, and pretty soon he would have the sheep to worry about.

He looked at Carla for the first time. She was a very pretty girl, high-chinned with conscious pride; she stood, the sheriff thought, like a thoroughbred filly, and the sight of her gave him hope in at least one quarter. Surely a girl like Carla wouldn't want to come within a mile of a flock of smelly, blatting, snot-nosed sheep.

PABLO ORDONEZ was worrying about the sheep. This was the evening of the third day since Steve had ridden in to Rosario. They could have had the flock on the holding grounds outside the town by now, but they had struck southward to reach the waterhole in the white brush draw that curled around the base of the Mesa del Gavilan. It had been a never-failing source of water, in the memory of both, but now it held nothing but stinking green mud, white and crusted and sun-cracked around the edges, imprisoning the buzzard-picked bones of three cows that had bogged down trying desperately to get a drink.

They had gone a full day's drive out of their way, for nothing. Yesterday, turning back to the northeastward and trailing the sheep through a high mountain pass, there had been a thin, blowing mist. Not rain. Not enough to fill the *tinajas*—potholes in the flat limestone rocks—but enough for the sheep to lick a little moisture from the browse. It had saved them for a little while.

But today at nooning, when the sheep should have been feeding, they huddled panting with their heads under the dwarfed scrub cedars, some of them with their heads under the bellies of the others, seeking shade. Now the coolness of evening brought its false relief. It was still ten or twelve miles to Rosario. And tomorrow. . . .

"Senor," said Pablo Ordonez, turning his seamed face toward Steve, "I think somebody rides this way."

His ears were as sharp as his eyes. At first Steve heard only the idle wind slap of the wagon sheet against the bows; then he made out the hoofbeats of a horse turning from the stage road. The sound slowed, skirting the sheep, fading out in the gathering darkness.

Then there came a woman's voice. "Steve! Steve Murdock!"

"Hello!" he answered, wondering. "Who's there?"

"Katie. I've got to talk to you."

He jumped to his feet and saw her come around the wagon, saw the firelight find her as she stepped over the wagon tongue. She walked with an easy, swinging, free-limbed stride that had once been the walk of a tomboy, leggy and flat-chested; the gait was the same, now but Katie had changed. Ten feet away she halted, the firelight burnishing glints in her red hair.

"Hello, Katie," Steve said.

She smiled, slapping her divided riding skirt with a plaited Mexican quirt. "Damn you, Steve, first for going away, and now for coming back!"

"I know. I should never have gone. I wouldn't have, if I'd known you were going to turn out so pretty. Just three years, and look at you now!"

"Save that for the single girls, Steve. Or did you know I'm married?"

"Yes. I got the bad news. Sit down; have a cup of coffee. This is Pablo Ordonez, my *segundo*. Watch him like you'd watch a chicken hawk. He's a lady killer."

Pablo's teeth gleamed in appreciation of the compliment. He swept the dust with his sombrero, and murmured politely that the sheep demanded his attention. When he had gone, Katie sat on a box, crossing her legs.

"I can't stay," she said, "and they mustn't know that I came out here."

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"You mean Big? Don't worry, Katie."

He saw a faint flush in her cheeks. She said, "You don't need to rub it in. I didn't mean Big, not entirely. But this is the first time I've slipped away to see another man. I guess that makes me a hussy. The church ladies will say so."

"Let 'em," said Steve. "You look like quite a lady, yourself. I can remember when you used to ride in skirts—astride, too."

Katie's chin went up. "I've showed those old buzzards a few things, and I'll show 'em a lot more before I'm through!" She eyed him for a minute. "Steve, why are you doing this? And why did you have to horn in at the bank the other night?"

"Bank?" He handed Katie a cup of coffee, and their fingers touched. "Banks and I are strangers. I haven't got a dime."

"Don't give me that innocent talk. Oscar Poe described you to a T, even if you did wear a slicker and a bandanna mask. Oh, maybe nothing will come of it unless the grand jury takes it up. But you'll have Jim Harney on your tail again."

"Did you come out here just to tell me that?"

She struck her boot with the quirt. "You know why I came out here. I wanted to see you." She paused. "Big has always been jealous of you, Steve."

"Flattering, but not satisfying," he said.

"This is no time for joking. I'm afraid. Did you know that Von Wettner died? The Frasers brought his body to town today, and even if Harney's store has a coffin, they won't sell it for him! There's a meeting of the Cattlemen's Association this evening; that's how I got away. They'll kick Kyle out of the Association unless he cancels the lease. And tomorrow morning you'll have visitors—Jim Harney and Big, and probably Arch Kennedy."

He had expected that Von Wettner would die, and still the news was a shock. He thought, whoever did it, Harney had it done.

Katie watched his face as he stared into the fire, and she said again, "Steve, I'm afraid! Why are you doing this?"

"It's a job. Remember when I didn't have a job, when nobody down here would give me one because they were afraid of Harney? Well, I've got one, now. And the madder it makes Harney, the better it suits me."

"But you can't win. He's still running this country."

"I know. And I guess Big is Number Two. You're getting up in the world, Katie."

He was immediately sorry he had said it, but the girl only tossed her head. "I'm showing them! And Big won't always be working for Harney. He's going into politics. He'll be county judge, first. Old Judge Wallace is getting along, you know. Then maybe he'll run for the legislature."

"You say he won't be working for Harney? If he's elected, Harney will run the show, and you know it!"

"Don't be nasty, Steve. Sure, Harney would support Big for election, but he wouldn't own him afterward. I can promise you that. Do you know who made Big Lewis read law for the last two years? Do you know who runs him, owns and controls him? *I* do. I can wrap him around my little finger. I can put him in the governor's mansion some day."

Steve regarded her thoughtfully. This was a different Katie Evans, not the leggy, coltish tomboy he had first known, but an even earlier Katie grown up, remembering the shabbiness of her schooldays, remembering the unthinking cruelty of the other children. "I smell a polecat, I smell a polecat!" they had chanted at the trapper's daughter, and nothing could ever make her forget. She was showing them, she would show them even more.

Now she rose, smiling. "But we're not in the governor's mansion yet. I'm still keeping books for the feed store, and I'd better be home when Big gets there. But please listen to me, Steve. Please be careful!"

"I'm always careful, Katie. Good night."

Old Pablo was smiling when he came back to the campfire, where Steve sat staring moodily into the flames.

Steve said, "Get to bed. They're coming in the morning—Harney and the others, including the sheriff."

"We must water the sheep then. It will be a warm day, and they must drink or die."

Steve unrolled his bedding. He said, "I'll try to pay for water. Money talks as far as Harney's concerned, it always did. I want it understood, that there's to be no trouble. Von

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Wettner planned to handle all this leggally, and we'll do the same."

"*Si, senor.* But it is not right. Water is a blessing from God. Water, and a beautiful woman like that one, should be here for the taking!"

WAGON wheels woke Steve. He stamped into his boots and saw Pablo squatting by the campfire, nursing it back into life. The wagon he had heard turned in from the stage road, trace chains making music. It was Kyle Fraser, sporting a new hat, and Ellie and Carla Von Wettner sat beside him.

Carla was looking at the sheep with curiosity and what might have been distaste, watching them straggle out from the bed grounds to lick the dew on the browse and lift their voices in a growing chorus of quavering complaint. The dew only tantalized them. As Pablo had predicted, it was going to be a warm day. Kyle Fraser came over with his bantam rooster stride.

Steve asked, "Is that a new hat?"

Kyle flushed. "Got it at Dubose's. Seems like my old one must have blown off the other night."

"Wind was kind of high, wasn't it?" said Steve. He went to where his saddle was racked on the wagon tongue, and got Kyle's old hat out of the slicker. "Better take this dynamite, too," he said. "I don't like to keep the stuff around."

"Much obliged," Kyle said drily, "for a lot of things. Arch Kennedy was down to see me, and I reckon you sure pulled my bacon out of the fire. Steve, you're headed for trouble. We brought Von Wettner's body to town last night."

"I know," Steve said, and nodded toward Carla, who was getting down from the wagon, showing a shapely ankle. "Am I partners with her, now?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't want to bet on how long. Arch Kennedy tried to talk her into selling out her share. He told her it would save a lot of trouble. Seems like that just riled her. From what I've seen, I'd say she's as headstrong as a mule in an alfalfa patch. I feel kind of sorry for you."

"What about yourself?

The little man's chin came up. "They threw me out of the Cattleman's Association last night. Not that it matters; the Association never did anything for me. But it shows how far Harney will go out of his way to kick a man when he's down. He'll be out here this morning. I'll send the women back to town, and I'll side you." He tapped the handle of his sixshooter.

Steve shook his head. "You can go back to town with the girls, Kyle. This is going to be different. I'm fighting Harney, yes. That's the main reason I took the job. But Von Wettner had it figured out right, and there won't be any ruckus. There's a legal way of getting the sheep to your range, and that's how we're going to handle it."

"Maybe you'll try to do it legally, but Harney won't," Kyle said. "He spoke up in the meeting last night. He said he wouldn't let sheep on his land, and that's his wire, right across the road yonder."

It's also a county road," said Steve. "Come on, let's get some breakfast."

Ellie Fraser, plump and competent, had already deposed Pablo from his cooking chores and was making a fresh pot of coffee. Carla came over from the Fraser wagon and addressed the old Mexican.

"At least most of the sheep are fat," she said.

Pablo shook his shaggy head. "No, senorita," he said gravely, "the sheep are not fat. They are very skinny. For a long time they have had no water to drink."

She stood on tiptoe and scanned the flock with an air of proprietorship. "Then it must be the wool. They are wearing so much wool it makes them look fat, I suppose."

"Senorita," Pablo said, "it is not even the wool. What you see is only the bigness of the stomach. You see, senorita, these sheep are the ewes—the lady sheep, senorita—and most of them are what you call in the family way."

THE sun went high, and forward progress became a dusty, tortured crawl. Steve to dismount and free a panting, hoarsely bleating ewe that had been crowded against Jim Harney's barbed wire and was caught there. She stumbled, leaving a little tattered

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streamer of dirty wool clinging to the cruel fence. Another ewe was down, yonder by a greasewood clump; Steve stayed afoot, leading Castizo, and got her moving again. The knowledge that he had been reduced to walking struck him with significant force. A cowboy never walked.

He got back in the saddle, boots dusty, wool grease on his hands and on his leather leggins, dust caked on his sweating face. They were almost abreast of Harney's windmill, and silvery metal flashing in the sun suggested coolness. The sheep dogs left the flock and slipped guiltily under the wire into Two Sevens territory. They went over the yellow clay swell of the tank dam and came back with their tails like banners.

Now Pablo came driving the mules up from the rear, Carla sitting with him on the wagon seat. The water keg that was racked on the side of the wagon rattled emptily; they had watered Castizo and the mules from its scant supply last night. A glassy-eyed ewe lay at Carla's feet. The sheep's dirty head was in the girl's lap, and as Pablo pulled the wagon to a stop, Carla poured a trickle of water down the parched throat from a tin cup.

"And now, senor?" Pablo began. "That windmill yonder—"

"I sent Kyle to town, Pablo. He will round up two or three freight wagon outfits, and all the barrels he can find. He'll be back this afternoon with enough water to pull us through, if we can hold out that long."

"I want these sheep watered!" Carla announced. "Cut that fence and drive them to the tank!"

Steve Murdock looked at her and was surprised at his own patience. It had been developed, these past weeks, by working with the sheep, by facing exasperating problems that were only made worse by temper or haste. He had learned a lot. A year ago, he would have cut the wire.

Now he said, "No, Miss Von Wettner. We don't want every cattleman in the Bend against us before we get there. Your brother had the right idea. He intended to stay within the law."

"He got killed!" she flashed. "Are you scared? Are you afraid of Jim Harney?"

Steve reddened. "If a man asked me that—" he began, then made a gesture of dismissal. "Never mind. But part of my deal with your brother was that I'm bossing this drive. We'll not cut the fence."

"The sheep are dying!" Carla said angrily. "And I'm the majority stockholder now. If we have to settle this in court—"

"Senor," Pablo Ordonez said quietly, "I think the Senor Harney and the other men are coming, yonder."

He pointed, not down the dusty road toward Rosario, where Steve had been watching, but into Two Sevens pasture, beyond the creaking windmill. Harney and five or six other men, all on horseback, were coming through the mesquites, eyes fixed on the dirty gray tide that choked and crept past the Two Sevens wire. Big Lewis was there, a barrel-chested man, wide of shoulder, riding at Harney's right hand as his chief lieutenant. He's Katie's husband, Steve reminded himself. Sheriff Arch Kennedy slouched wearily in the saddle of a little pinto that was almost dwarfed by Harney's horse. The other four riders would be Two Sevens hands.

Steve turned to the girl. "Well?" he asked. "This is a showdown. It's only the first one between here and the Rafter F, but maybe it sets the pattern. Maybe it determines whether or not anybody else is going to get killed. Do I handle it, or not?"

She opened her mouth angrily, but something in his face, something she saw in his eyes, made her waver.

"Get up on the wagon," Steve told her, and it was a command. "You might as well stay out of the dust," he added more kindly.

A moment later, the men faced each other across the barbed wire.

Arch Kennedy looked down and saw the sheep stringing out, stumbling blindly along the wire as they began to catch the sweet smell of water on the wind.

He lifted his hand and called, "Murdock, Steve Murdock! Let's handle this in a peaceful and friendly way."

We may handle it peacefully, but we damn well won't be friendly, Steve thought. Aloud, he said, "You remember what I told you, Arch? If anybody makes trouble, it won't be this outfit."

Pablo had started the wagon slowly up the

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road, the mules picking their way through the dust, through the scattering, blatting flock. That was good. It was good to get Carla out of earshort; the talk might be rough.

"Murdock," Harney said in his high-pitched voice, "I didn't figure you were this big a fool. You haven't got a chance of getting away with it."

"Like Von Wettner?" Steve challenged.

Harney looked disturbed. He said, "I didn't know Von Wettner, but I reckon what happened to him proves that sheep aren't welcome in the Bend. And you're too damn close to Two Sevens territory. I want these sheep moved out of here fast. Understand?"

Steve grinned. "*I* understand. But sheep don't know the meaning of the word. They don't know fast, or *andale* or *pronto*. They take their own sweet time."

"Well, we can educate them! Boys, I want you to get out there and help prod those snot-noses along. Wilson, you and Bailey—"

"Hold it!" Steve broke in. "This is a county road. If you or any of your hands tries to haze my sheep, I'll have you in court. Right, sheriff?"

Arch Kennedy shifted uncomfortably in his saddle. "It's a county road, all right," he admitted.

HARNEY opened his mouth, then closed it again. He was a hard loser, and not accustomed to losing. He said, "It doesn't give you the right to crowd my wire. Any sheep that pushes my fence is going to have its head bashed in. String out, boys, and ride the wire!"

Finished?" Steve asked. "If you are, I've got a business proposition to make. The sheep are dry. I'll pay you to let me water them at that tank."

Harney stared. "Did you hear that?" he asked Big Lewis. "Did you hear that, Kennedy? You've got gall, Murdock. I wouldn't let you stink up my tank for a thousand dollars! And I'll bet you another thousand that you haven't got a thousand dollars!"

"You ought to know," Steve retorted. He waved his hand. "All right, Manuel, no watering here. Let's move 'em along."

Pablo Ordonez, driving the wagon, was well up in the van of the flock. The blowing dust screened team and wagon and driver alike. Nobody saw but Carla, and she did not understand what the old Mexican was doing. Pablo pulled the mules close to the wire, leaned out, and dropped the ewe that Carla had revived over the fence.

"Go with God, little one!" he murmured.

Then he handed the reins to Carla, and climbed back over the seat to get another sheep. In a very short moment there were six ewes, bunched and bewildered, in Two Sevens pasture. The smell of water was in their nostrils, but the main body was beyond the barbed wire, and herd instinct was strong in their timid hearts.

"Hey, they're coming through the fence up there!" bawled a Two Sevens rider. "Come give me a hand!"

He spurred his horse toward the ewes, and yelled *"Hi-ya! Hi-ya!"*

The horse shot his ears forward and balked at getting to close to the unfamiliar creatures. The sheep doubled, ran against the wire, and then, thoroughly confused and terrified, ran under the horse's legs.

"Wilson, you and Pete lift up that bottom wire," the cowboy urged as the other riders came to his assistance. "Bailey and I will drive 'em under the fence."

He slapped a quirt on his bullhide leggins.

Wilson and Pete dismounted and lifted the lowest strand of wire so that the trespassers could be evicted, but the plan of operation went wrong with startling suddeness. The six ewes had never been hazed before by men on horseback; the violent maneuvering and loud shouting increased their panting, blatting bewilderment. They ran for the mesquites, toward the tank dam. And from the road, a score, fifty, a hundred sheep surged under the wire in their foolish follow-the-leader fashion.

Wilson dropped his end of the wire hastily and yelled for the other cowboy to do the same, but that did no good. The way had been pointed out, the trail was blazed. Sheep outside the fence began dropping to their knees in the mad urge to go with the movement of the mass; they scrambled under the wire.

A widening dirty gray tide flowed unbrokenly into the pasture and washed clamorously over the swell of the yellow clay tank dam.

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A gun cracked twice, three times, and Steve Murdock never knew who had pulled it. Then the dust thinned, and he was looking at Carla Von Wettner.

She stood on the wagon seat, the wind whipping at her fancy clothes. The .30-.30 that Pablo carried in the wagon was lifted to her shoulder. Her voice had a high, hysterical edge.

"Shoot just one more of my sheep, and I'll shoot *you!*"

Arch Kennedy was looking at her in shocked surprise. He yelled, "Lady, you can't do that! Put down that gun." And then he looked imploringly at Steve Murdock. "Make her! She's going to hurt somebody. That Winchester might go off."

Steve rode over to the wagon. The gun was shaking.

He reached up and took it out of Carla's hands, and she sank down on the seat and began to cry. There were three dead ewes across the wire, but three thousand sheep were crowding the tank dam, drinking.

Harney pressed his black horse close to the fence, his smile gone, his face livid. "Murdock, you'll pay for this!" he choked. "I ran you out of this country once, and I'll do it again!"

Steve handed the saddle gun to Pablo. "Seems like I offered to pay," he said coolly. "Three dead ewes about foots the bill, because when you kill sheep they come high." He turned to the sheriff. "You saw Harney's hands spook the sheep. They didn't know how to handle 'em, or this wouldn't have happened."

"I saw enough," Kennedy said shortly. He was breathing easier now; the danger of an open gun fight seemed past. He looked at Harney and said, "You making any charges, Jim?"

"I'll take it out of his hide!" Harney growled.

Then he and Big Lewis rode into the mesquites, the four cowboys following. The pandemonium was past; the sheep, their thirst slaked, were quiet and docile. Manuel and Diego propped up the lowest wire between two posts, took the dogs into the pasture, and brought the flock back to the road with no difficulty.

REDHEADED Katie Lewis, born into a man's world and reared in camps and shantytown, still felt more at ease in the roughly-furnished office of the feed store and livery stable than in the new frame house Big Lewis had built at the east end of town, on what Katie's kind of people scornfully called "Silk Stocking Avenue." This afternoon she sat at a dusty and scarred roll-top desk, frowning over the monthly chore of balancing the books. She had company. Her father, Jake Evans, was in from his trapper's camp on San Juan Draw with a bale of hides.

Listening to a far-off train whistle, he let down his tilted chair. "You want me to go over to the depot and see if the coffin came in on the five-ten? If it didn't you're going to have to get some more ice."

"Hush up!" Katie said, shuddering. "Run along and see, but for heaven's sake quit talking about it!"

Jake limped out to see if the casket for Von Wettner had arrived from El Paso, and she settled down to total the rising costs of feeding horses and mules. The door opened, and a long shadow fell in the room.

"What are the chances of renting a buggy?" Steve Murdock drawled. "I need a driver with this rig. Got to send it out to the sheep wagon and bring Miss Von Wettner to the hotel."

"Oh? I hear she's very pretty and stylish."

"Well, I don't know. Stylish, I reckon. Not exactly pretty."

"Big says she is. What happened out there today, Steve?"

"Some of Harney's boys learned about sheep. Ask Big."

"I did, and he nearly bit my head off. He was drinking. He must have started drinking early in the day. But you ought to quit while you're ahead, Steve." Katie closed the ledger and looked at him from under long lashes. "If she isn't pretty, then what do you see in her? Don't tell me you've fallen in love with the sheep business!"

"*Miaouw, miaouw!*" Steve said teasingly. "How about that buggy?"

Katie made a face. "I don't want to do anything for her, but I just work here. I'll send it as soon as Dad gets back."

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Steve had ridden into town with Arch Kennedy, although the sheriff was largely incommunicative and had made it plain that he didn't want to be seen in the company of a sheepman, unless it was a sheepman in handcuffs. Steve had seen Kyle Fraser in time to call off the arrangements for hauling water, and now Kyle and Ellie were headed back to the Rafter F. A room had been reserved for Carla at the hotel. For a couple of nights, anyway, Steve thought; and wondered about the rest of the drive, hoping fervently that she wouldn't play up the partnership to the extent of insisting on accompanying the sheep.

But he could tackle that problem when it came up. Now he rode thoughtfully to the courthouse. Detailed study of the fly-specked county abstract map that hung on the wall there would take time, but even a hasty reading was discouraging. He knew a large portion of the wide, wild country it depicted in miniature scale. Here was San Juan Draw, a dry watercourse that began north of Rosario and drained a wide, curving valley that wound between the rimrocked hills until it reached the ghost-like Chisos range. There it became a narrow canyon with sheer walls, finally emptying its floodwaters into the Rio Grande.

In normal years, there had been waterholes scattered along seventy-five miles of the San Juan, and small outfits bordering on both sides had depended upon them for water. But in this drought the water holes might have dried up. Steve saw that the names of Walter Sims and Ace Babb and Joe Collins and the Tate brothers were no longer on the map. They had been blotted out. In their place the plats were rubber-stamped in purple ink, "Rosario Land & Development Co." The name marched down the map, down the wide and wild and rugged land.

Steve Murdock stepped back, his mouth hard. The men he had known as small operators were mostly gone, probably punching cows for somebody else at thirty dollars a month. Some of them were probably working for Jim Harney. He knew the story all too well; drought and a slump in the price of beef, a mounting bill for bacon and beans at Harney's General Merchandise and a loan at Harney's bank, and finally the rubber stamp formality of foreclosure.

LOOKING at the map, Steve suddenly understood why Jim Harney wanted Kyle Fraser's small holding. The Rafter F was bordered on the west and southwest by Don Miguel's Luna Media, and on the east by Ed Valentine's Flying V—both big outfits, and not easily swallowed. On the north, there was only Marlin Dubose's few sections between Kyle and Harney's spreading empire.

The Rafter F in Harney's hands would give him a corridor all the way from Rosario and the railroad to the Rio Grande; it would give him an outlet, through Gunsight Pass, to the best crossing on the canyoned river for many miles. To the west and east of the ford below Gunsight Pass, where San Juan Draw debouched, the stream ran through walls so precipitous that even a mountain goat found it difficult to get a drink.

The sun was down when Steve rode back up the street. He hitched Castizo to a cottonwood and went into the hotel. There he turned toward the dining room, and at that moment Oscar Poe came down the lobby stairs.

The bank clerk's head was still bandaged, and his face was as pale as his celluloid collar. He halted abruptly on the lower steps, one hand fluttering nervously at the banister rail, and then he hurried past Steve and went into the street, purpose in his stride.

In the mottled mirror behind the counter in the dining room, Steve could see the whole room, including the bar at the end, and the four big-hatted men who leaned against it. They had been talking pleasantly as Steve entered; now one nudged his companion and nodded toward the bar mirror, and there was a silence before they turned for a better look at Steve Murdock. He knew three of them—Ed Valentine, Mase Smith and Bill Crenshaw—and under other circumstances would have sauntered over to buy a drink. Now it was their place to make the first move toward friendship or enmity.

The silence was hostile. Crenshaw, owner of the L Bar, a big, rawboned, freckled man, broke it, speaking loudly.

"You boys hear about the sideshow they had when the circus came to Del Rio? Man out front offered to bet ten dollars that nobody could stay in the tent for five minutes. A

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rancher from Carta Valley took him up, but came out right away, holding his nose. A farmer from down Uvalde way lasted about a minute before he staggered out gasping for air. Then a sheepherder went in. Everything was quiet for awhile, and everybody was mighty tense. Then damned if a polecat didn't streak out of the tent and jump into the Rio Grande!"

Steve Murdock felt the heat surge into his face. Let it pass! he thought. Let it pass!

Then there were loud voices in the lobby, and the mirror showed six men coming into the dining room, and coming up behind him. Big Lewis was in the lead, flushed and unsteady; Oscar Poe trailed him, still filled with excitement, and Steve knew that Oscar had hurried out to find Big and bring him here. Following were Bailey and Wilson and Pete, and the other two Sevens rider who had been at the tank earlier in the day.

"Murdock!" Big called, in a voice thick with liquor. "Wanna talk to you! Mudock, you're a yellow-bellied sheepherder!" Big halted ten feet away. "You hear me, Murdock? I'll say it again!"

"Big, you've had a few too many," Steve said quietly. "Better go home."

Oscar Poe put his hand on Big's arm. "That's him!" he shrilled. "That's him. I know his voice."

"Shut up!" Big said contemptuously, pushing Oscar away. He said, "I've been home, Murdock. I went home, and my wife wasn't there. Where is she?"

"Why ask me?"

Big's face contorted. "Because I know damn well what you're after! I know why you came back here. You and she used to be lovey-dovey. You used to take her buggy riding, and I'll bet your footprints are still on the dashboard."

"You cheap son!" Steve flared.

He pushed his elbows against the counter and came off the stool in one swift motion, pivoting and straightening with a long roundhouse right. It caught Lewis under the ear and sent him reeling into Mase Smith, more than half sobered.

"Take him home, Mase," Steve said. "Take him to Jim Harney. Ask Harney why he doesn't do his own dirty work."

"I'm not stopping a fight for you, sheepherder!" Smith retorted. "Stand back, boys. Give 'em room." He gave Lewis an encouraging shove.

Big slammed Steve's guard aside and ripped skin from his jaw in a wild swing, but he had more liquor than coördination. He threw another right. Steve ducked it, and hammered another fist to the big man's chin. The blow snapped Lewis's head back, but that was all; Steve realized he would only break his hands if he kept punching at Big's head. Now Big was coming in another bull-like rush. Steve sidestepped it, and the other man ran into the counter. He shook his head and charged back, outweighing Steve by forty pounds, outreaching him by inches, driven by insane, drunken jealousy.

Steve moved back, letting Big throw a right again. Then he slammed Lewis in the stomach, full force behind the blow. It knocked a deep grunt out of Big, and he doubled with pain. As he lowered his head, Steve chopped down at the back of his neck, hacking at him with the outside edge of his open hand.

Big Lewis fell on his face. He got up on one knee, gasping, his face contorted; then rose, finally, to his feet. Steve hit him twice, first to the stomach, and again at the base of the neck as he folded again. That time, the big man lay still.

Steve stepped over him. "Anybody else?" he asked.

"Come on, boys," Wilson said. "He won't be happy till he's had it!"

There was just enough time for Steve to kick over a chair in front of him, to put his back against a table. They fanned out, four to one, coming after him like coon dogs wary of being slashed by their cornered quarry.

"Hey!" yelled one of the railroad men. "No fair!"

"Shut up!" shouted Crenshaw. "Don't kill him, boys. Just mess him up a little."

ON STEVE'S left were Wilson and Bailey; Pete and the other man bore in from the right. They came with hands out and open, ready to spring and grab; they were afraid of his fists. He swung at Pete, making him jump back, then he snatched up

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the chair by the nearest leg, and brought it around head high in a whistling arc. Wilson ducked, but the back rest of the chair caught Bailey across the ear with an ear-splitting crack and sent him sprawling under the next table.

Then Wilson grabbed the chair. They wrestled with it, and it broke apart, leaving Steve holding only the underpinning. He fended Pete off with this.

The railroad man yelled, "Look out, he's got a gun!"

That was Bailey. Steve whirled, seeing the Two Sevens man on his knees, blood running down his chin in a thin stream, a dazed look in his eyes.

He had his left hand on the floor to brace himself; he was tugging at his holstered gun with the right.

Steve brought down the chair's four legs with smashing force. A stout round knocked Bailey senseless, and the whole framework hung on his head like the antlers on an eight-point buck.

But then Wilson clubbed Steve from behind, and Pete sprang high on his back. Steve went down, fighting against a blackness.

He was on the floor, and a boot was thumping heavily against his ribs, leaving his body sick with ache and breathlessness.

From far off he heard a woman scream. Somebody—it sounded like Harney—was calling off the dogs, which was strange. Steve found himself on hands and knees, Katie Lewis was hovering over him, pulling at his arm.

"Get up, Steve, get up," she pleaded. "Show 'em you can walk out of here. Show the whole rotten bunch!"

She whirled on the others. "You call yourselves men? I can lick any two of you, and that goes for Big Lewis, too!"

Steve rose painfully. His vision cleared a little, and he saw Carla leaning white-faced against a table, holding onto it as if she were going to be sick. Harney was beside her, talking.

"Too bad you had to see this, but sometimes the boys get out of hand. It's like I told you; it shows how high the feeling is running against sheep."

Carla looked at Steve wordlessly, her eyes terrified. He took a step forward, ribs hurting, a hot, clean anger burning away the mists in his brain.

He said through puffed lips, "Why didn't you get in on the fight, Harney? Step up and I'll knock those pretty teeth down your throat."

Harney smiled easily. "I happened to be out with Katie, bringing Miss Von Wettner to town. There'll be another time, sheepherder—unless you run."

"I don't run worth a damn," Steve said, and lunged forward, but the railroad men grabbed him and pulled him down into a chair.

Harney turned to Carla and lifted his hat. "Think it over," he said. "Good night for now."

He went out through the lobby, Oscar Poe siding him, and the ranchmen followed. One of the railroad men went to the bar and brought Steve a glass of whiskey. He drank it down, and it burned the cut in his mouth.

Katie brought him his hat and smoothed back his hair. He looked at her, and at Big Lewis, propped against the counter while the Two Sevens boy ministered to Bailey. She was prettier than ever when angry, and he could understand the worry that had made Big drink, the jealousy that had brought him here.

At least, Steve thought, Big Lewis had fought fair.

Carla found words at last. "I'm sorry, Steve."

"I'll live to pay 'em back," he said. "Katie, you'd better take Big home, and tell him where you've been."

"I don't have to tell him anything! I wouldn't care if I never saw him again!"

She put her face down on the table and broke into hysterical sobs.

(To be continued in the next issue)

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A Gun, a Grave, and a Girl

By Jo Hindman

BEN FERRIS discarded the idea of socking Wick Bode's jaw, and getting back his money by flatly demanding it. Grim joy in the thought was sidetracked by an oddity that appeared along the road. Ahead on the shimmering, sand-scoured, steaming hot valley loomed a sign, big as the posters Ben had seen outside dancehalls in the mining country up north. Only this sign was prim and neat and made Ben's mouth water. It said: "Homemade Pies."

Swallowing hungrily, he sat forward on the buckboard seat and addressed the driver.

BEN FERRIS HAD a score of his own to settle . . . but a pretty girl with a rifle can be mighty hard to ignore

"Mister, is that a real pie sign tacked on that little ranch house over there all by its lonesome, or is it just anothc ornery desert mirage?"

The old rancher said, "That's Miss Millicent Rand's bake shop."

Ben was storing the mouth-watering information for later use when a girl, the tail of her brown hair bobbing, came running out the ranch house door. Wind was whipping the girl's gingham skirt. Even from that dis-

MILLICENT

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tance, Ben knew she'd be prettier, close at hand. He straightened and tilted his hat. She ran to the driver's side of the wagon.

"Is there a letter for me, Mr. Hoolie?" she coaxed the old man.

Ben could see now that her eyes were the color of blue lupine. He figured she was at least seventeen.

The old man pulled a handful of mail from under his coat, which was folded on the seat, and thumbed, squinted at, and riffled several envelopes at arm's length. On the top one, Ben caught the return address of a Superior Court of the State of California. It was addressed to Wick Bode.

"Nope, Miss Millicent," the rancher said at length. "None this time, either. But your father's coming!" he promised, apparently trying to cheer her. "He and I set that date for pinochle a long time ago, and I'm coming tomorrow night to beat him. Maybe you have an extra piece of pie?" he hinted.

She threw what looked like a grateful glance. The wagon was in motion again, and she was jogging along, plying the old man with a string of questions. Had Mr. Hoolie seen her father in Middle Butte? Nope. Along the way? Nope. Had Mr. Hoolie seen a cloud of dust that might be a driven herd? Nope.

Ben felt sorry for her when she dropped off and turned back. He stared after her, trying to remember her face, snub-nosed, independent, yet obviously worried. He also smarted with hurt, recalling that her clear eyes had dropped him after one passing look.

Ben turned around, intending to ask Mr. Hoolie why the girl's father was absent from home, but the team broke into a gallop that the old rancher had trouble sawing down. The mules were smelling water. Shacks of the Exposed Treasure gold mine showed up ahead, straggling down the canyon and over the sandy draw.

Ben leaped down and threw a half-hitch over a post. Beating wheel grit off his hands, he raised his eyes to the hills that were throwing the beginning shadows of night. Green pine stroked upward from thin chaparral, and Ben drew in deeply the tangily scented air. The old man, Wick Bode's letter in hand, was rapping on one of the tar-papered bunkhouses, and the sound was thunderous in the growing evening stillness.

A dark slithered across Ben's toe. He sprang back, then leaped to bring the rearing, frightened mules down. The rattler sideflipped into the sagebrush before Ben could grab a stick and follow. He replaced the stick, propped it against the watering trough. Standing there so handy, the snake-catching weapon proved that this was side-winder territory.

Now Ben turned his attention to the mine itself, a raw hole gaping on the far side of the draw. Ore cars had been long stalled on rusty track, and the mounds of rock waiting for shipment to the Middle Butte mill were far too high for prosperity. Was Wick Bode's Exposed Treasure mine just another glory-hole scraped poor? A squeaking hinge on the abandoned equipment reminded Ben of the way Mr. Hoolie had argued when Ben had insisted on hitching a ride out of town with him.

"Sonny, you're wasting your time," the old rancher had warned. "Wick Bode's not hiring; he's firing."

Ben cursed himself liberally. Why hadn't he laid over in Middle Butte, at least for a day, to find out about Wick Bode and his fabulous mine? But now it was too late. When you've tracked a deadbeat for years, you don't stop to ask questions when you come close enough to smell him.

Ben shoved a rock-roughened hand under his hat, and rubbed the spot where Wick, in parting three years before, had sneaked a blackout blow.

Ben had revived to a fierce throbbing, bitter, wiser, and dead broke. He and Wick had staked a claim discovered by Ben, mined the gold, and sold it; but Wick had run off with Ben's share.

Ben started over from scratch, living by his talent of spotting ore-bearing veins. Miners working shallow pockets along the Mother Lode creek beds gave Ben a cut for finding the deeper sources of gold on their claims. Sometimes they paid him more handsomely than they knew, by handing out gossip that helped Ben trail Wick, seeking to get his money back. Now Ben had caught up with Wick.

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BUT, from the looks of the run-down mine, he'd arrived when Wick's luck was ragged. Mr. Hoolie's rapping on the door ceased, and a coarse rumble chewed the air. Ben swung around and saw Wick's hulk cramming the bunkhouse doorway, dirty, tousled, with six-shooters weighting his hips.

Wick put out a paw for the mail, then turned an unshaven face in Ben's direction. Hoolie scurried off to shake his team into motion and continue to his ranch.

Three years had broadened and toughened Ben's frame, and Wick didn't recognize him until Ben planted a boot on the lowest step. The bearded face went slack with surprise; then the scowl of displeasure melted into false heartiness.

"Well, well, well," he boomed. "The gold sniffer in person. Come in, come in, boy, come in."

A reek of unwashed sweat and liquor swamped Ben; his nostrils flared, but he followed Wick in. The unswept room was rancid with more of the same; unmade bed, greasy pans on the castiron stove, smelly horse blankets and saddle leather heaped in a corner adding their share. Wick threw the legal-size envelope on a table top moist with whisky rings, and motioned Ben to a chair.

"I'm not staying," Ben said, hooking his thumbs in his belt. "I've come for my money."

Wick scratched his stubbled chin. The shifty glitter of his eyes told that he was wondering whether to face up to Ben's demand or lie out of it.

"What makes you think I have money?" he sparred.

"You own the Exposed Treasure," Ben said. "It took money to start these diggings, and part of the money was mine."

"Yeah," Wick rumbled. "I bought the land from a dumb sheepherder, fifty dollars down, with monthly payments from now till doomsday. I told him I wanted grazing land; he got sore as Hades when he saw me trucking out rock at a hundred dollars a ton. He hauled me into court, by Jove. If he wants it back, he can have it. It's worthless; the big pay dirt is all gone."

Ben realized his original hunch was correct; the Exposed Treasure had been scraped to an empty shell. "Tough luck," he said callously. "But don't expect me to cry. I've come for what you owe me. Fork over."

Wick laughed. "You idiot!"

"Surely you're not broke?" Ben said, exasperated.

Wick lifted beefy hands, palms up. Dislike tightened within Ben. "If you are broke," he asked Wick, "why are you sticking around?"

"After all," Wick said, turning his back, "I own the place."

Ben knew his question had not been answered, nor was it likely to be. He'd have to stick around to find the answer. The actions of his ex-partner from this moment on would tell.

"At heart, I'm a rolling stone," he told Wick, "and I don't take to scratching your ornery leavings. But right now I'm hungry. How about some grub, and later a blanket?"

Wick picked up the envelope, ripped it with a black fingernail. "Grub's on the shelf," he replied off-handedly. "I'll rustle you up a bed roll, later on."

Thumbs hooked in his belt, Ben surveyed the mice-leavings on the shelf, and a slab of greasy bacon on top of that. "Think I'll take a walk," he said, stomach heaving. He strolled to the door and shut it between him and Wick.

At the bottom of the steps, Ben unfastened his belt, which was hung with canteen, pan, and miner's pick, and let the heavy equipment clank to the ground. Feeling lighter, he started toward the neighboring ranch house. He pried easily between the strands of a barbed wire range fence, and came upright in a field of ripening squash. One window of the house was aglow, and he could see the girl inside moving around.

Drawing closer, he saw that the curtains were made of the same checkered stuff as her dress. Ben went to the front porch and rapped. Instantly, she was at the door, throwing it wide with a welcoming smile.

"Oh," she said, on seeing him. Her smile drooped.

Ben raised his hat. "Evening, Miss Rand." She looked like a snub-nosed angel, framed by golden lamplight.

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SHE pushed at a lock of hair, and surveyed his cropped dark head and dusty work clothes. Then Ben heard her telling him that no spy of Wick Bode's was welcome on the Rand place. Ears ringing with amazement, he tried to interrupt, but she was rushing on in words torn with emotion.

"You can just turn right around and go back. Tell your boss that he can sit up all night and the night after next, and spy all he wants! It'll do him no good, because my father will be back in plenty of time to beat the deadline."

Her checkered bodice was blurring by the pounding underneath, and Ben thought he saw a teardrop glitter in her eye. Again he tried to speak, but she tipped her head back, silencing him. "Dad has worked like a slave to get this ranch on its feet. He's not going to lose it to a rattlesnake like Wick Bode." The tear finally broke loose and wriggled downward like rain on a windowpane.

Ben put in his word. "Golly, Miss Rand," he apologized softly, "I just came over fixing to buy myself a piece of pie."

She was drying her eyes. "I don't bake for Bode's men any more. He's tried every dirty trick he could conjure up. His cook laid a trail of scraps and lured my hens away, then threw them in the pot. The feathers blew over this way, so I know. Oh, that's just one of the low-down, mean things Bode keeps doing to run us out. Things aren't any better now that the rest of his outfit is gone. Bode is still over there!" She threw a black glance at the mine, then started to close the door.

"Wait," Ben pleaded, sensibly keeping his boots planted instead of sticking a toe inside. "What would you say, ma'am, if I told you Wick Bode isn't my boss?"

She hesitated, and Ben used the slight advantage. "I came here to southern California to settle an old score with Bode," he explained. "He doublecrossed me, too, a long time back, and stole my poke. My name is Ferris, ma'am—Ben Ferris, from the Mother Lode country, up north."

The door was still ajar, and Ben's heart warmed to see thoughts battling across the girl's pretty face. The goodness in her was reacting to his politeness; she wouldn't risk hurting his feelings by slamming the door.

She said finally, "If you'll sit down a spell and wait, I'll cut you a slab of pie." In a moment, her face was at the door again. "That is, if you like squash pie?"

"Love it," Ben said, nervously manhandling the brim of his hat.

Returning with a golden wedge on a plate, she said, "The reason I happen to have it on hand is that my father is due home any minute now." Her voice had a hollow ring, Ben thought, as though she were trying to convince herself.

He remained standing until she'd settled herself on the topmost step. Then he took the lowest step and cut into the pie. "If it's no secret, ma'am, what deadline is your father trying to beat?"

Thinking over an answer, her face was illumined by light thrown overhead from the door screen. She seemed more beautiful to Ben than ever. "Dad is a homesteader," she began. "According to the Homestead Act, a homesteader has to spend at least seven months of each year on his land. Dad's been hiring himself out between crops, rustling herds for cattlemen from Los Angeles to San Francisco. The market for beef is good up north. Dad's been saving to buy his own herd. But this year, he's run himself too short on time."

Her underlip trembled. "I'm awfully afraid he's run into trouble somewhere. If I had a horse, I'd ride out to try and find him. If—he doesn't get back by tomorrow midnight, by law he'll have to forfeit the land. Wick Bode is waiting to see us lose," she added.

"Why?" Ben asked, cutting another chunk of pie. "Have you found gold on your land?"

"We are ranchers, Mr. Ferris, not miners."

Ben was struck by the thought that Wick was a miner, not a rancher, but he changed the subject by shaking out the checkered napkin to admire it. "I like these blue-and-white checks," he said. "I noticed your curtains, too—and your dress," he added shyly.

Her lashes dropped. "Oh, the curtains!" she said. "I made a tablecloth to match. I had so much, I even made up shirts for Dad. The bolt was such a bargain, I couldn't pass it up."

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Hm! She's thrifty, Ben thought. A girl like that would make a good wife. She could sew and bake and keep a tidy house. She was pretty, too, Ben though, far prettier than any girl he had ever seen. The delicious pie turned unaccountably dry; he worked it down his throat and set the plate aside.

She was frowning at the plate; he'd left the crust. It was flaky and light and Ben's leaving it marked a deep insult to her housewifery. Sheepishly, Ben retrieved the plate and popped the pieces into his mouth.

"Mister Destry! That is the horse over there."

"Licked your platter clean, ma'am," he said, rising to go. Mollified, she smiled.

NEAR the watering trough, Wick's voice grated out of the dark, interrupting Ben's troubled flight from the exciting situation on the girl's porch steps. Bode was watering his saddle horse prior to corralling it overnight.

"There's a bedroll for you on the floor," Wick remarked.

Ben kept on going. He needed the bunkhouse quiet in which to probe his alarming state of mind. The girl was so doggoned sweet!

Lamplight revealed an Indian blanket-roll in the center of the room. Ben knelt to undo the tightly wound cord, the shadow of his hands moving giantlike on the bare boards of the wall. At first he thought he'd unrolled an old belt inside, but the dark thing was writhing and coiling and whipping with a vicious life of its own.

Electrified, Ben whipped an end of the blanket down, covering the beady eyes and restraining the body from spiralling into a death-dealing coil. Then Ben stomped the snake to death.

Head spinning with a rush of fear, he straightened and passed a hand across his eyes. A shudder worked up his leg, a repulsive reflex from the stomping that had saved his life. His hat was rolling on the floor; he stooped to pick it up. The blanket shook with a spasm, and new disgust traveled Ben's frame. He laid the blanket open, regarded it with loathing. The snake had been very alive, but now it was dying, its fangs crushed. It had been *too* alive, Ben realized in suddenly clearing insight, too frisky to have been imprisoned in that bed roll very long.

Ben lay down on the bed to think his situation through. The door creaked, pushed open by the end of a forked stick. When the panel stood wide open, the ungainly bulk of Wick Bode loomed into view. Wearing gloves and high boots, he stooped, cautiously probing the floor with the v-tipped branch to guard himself against the rattlesnake.

He jerked when he found the blanket defiled with the squirming pulp. Suspiciously, his eyes crawled to the figure on the bed. It was still. Wick's unshaven face gloated in a satisfied grin. Then Ben Ferris sat up. Wick Bode stiffened.

"Looking for a snake, Wick?" Ben asked evenly. "There it is, on your blanket."

Wick's eyes ignored the mangled mess. Fixed on Ben, they glared with naked murder. He cast the stick, aiming it at Ben's face. Ben ducked and catapulted from the edge of the bed, coming in low. The stick clattered

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off somewhere to his right. He tackled the big man, bringing him down like a sack of lard. Ben writhed, clutched for a hold, heard the ripping of cloth, felt his hands slither over the blubber of fat flesh.

Wick's fingers were clawing his throat, jagged nails gouging like hooks, but Ben succeeded in wrenching free. Turning, he hovered with arms spread-eagled, waiting for an opening to dive. Ben maneuvered. Wick was beginning to puff; he'd swilled too much, toughened too little. . .

Now he was on his feet, dwarfing Ben's slim-waisted body like a clumsy beast. With a sneak lunge, Wick tipped the table, sending an avalanche of bottles, glasses, and junk showering at Ben's feet. The kerosene lamp took the slide, exploding at the bottom in a splintery crash. The room blacked out.

Ben's eyes focussed vainly, trying to get his bearings from a patch of moonlight silvering the floor. With a wild thrill, he saw Wick's big feet moving across the bright patch, escaping to the door. Ben launched himself, fist outjutted, and Wick caught it between the eyes. He reeled, toppled like falling timber, and splintered off a table leg on the way down.

Ben stared down victoriously, chest heaving, hands clenched for more. "Do I get my money back, or do I have to stomp in your ornery head, too?"

Wick's eyes glittered through the dark. "I'm broke, damn you," he snarled.

"The Exposed Treasure is partly mine. I'll take my cut from the workings."

"The hell you say!" Wick said. He dug into a pocket and drew out something white. "Here's the order from the court. They've tacked a $50,000 judgment on the take. Light a match and see for yourself."

Ben's fists dropped, refusing to touch the crumpled sheet. "Everything you get," he said disgustedly, "you ruin, Wick Bode."

Wick said triumphantly, "I didn't think you'd want to team with an old has-been."

FINGERS of sunlight woke Ben. He blinked upward at the cloudless sky and eased himself stiffly on the wooden shelf where he'd spent the night—planks thrown across the top of an ore car. Snakebite had been Wick's cleverly planned murder weapon. Why had Wick tried to kill him?

Wick had no conscience, so the debt that stood between them, due to money Wick had stolen from Ben, wouldn't goad Wick to the brink of murder. His antagonism must stem from something bigger, something that was so important Wick wanted Ben out of the way at once. He'd lost no time planting the snake.

But Wick Bode wouldn't kill anything he found useful, even Ben. Ben's greatest talent was tracing "float" to its source in rich underground ore vein. Therefore, if Wick no longer considered him useful, that meant Wick had found pay dirt unaided, and didn't want Ben underfoot to ferret it out, also.

According to Wick, the Exposed Treasure had been abandoned as a gloryhole worked down to the sweepings. But any miner worth his dynamite knew that gloryholes are fed from somewhere. The Exposed Treasure had been abandoned, probably because Wick wanted everybody out of the way.

The real reason for Wick's unfriendliness probably was that Wick had found *new* gold. So, with the $50,000 judgment tying everything up and making the Exposed Treasure a worthless bit of property, Wick's tenacity in staying on the spot must mean that his new strike was on land he did not yet own!

Wick's fanatic eagerness concerning the Rand ranch put the finger on the source of the new gold. I'll bet it's on her land, Ben thought, wanting to protect Millicent Rand from Bode's trickery. Wick is sticking around waiting for her father to default and lose the land, so he can snap it up.

Ben rolled over and dropped lightly to the ground. No sign of life showed from the tar-papered bunkhouse where Wick slept. Noiselessly, Ben located his belt where he'd dropped it beside the shack steps, buckled it on, filled his empty stomach and canteen with cool water from the trough tap, then slipped into the manzanita and sagebrush graying the canyon walls.

By midmorning, he had discovered the trail of "float," a surface scattering of ore-bearing rock spilling down from somewhere above. He turned, looked into the valley below. The

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Rand ranch house lay a thousand feet below, caught in a puddle of shade. Millicent was in the yard, putting out wash. Ben grinned, surveyed the dingy cuffs of his bright orange shirt, and thought it would be nice having a wife to wash it.

He crossed a ridge, pried between the barbed wire of a range fence, and worked painstakingly up the slope, examining rocks. When the float trail broadened and Ben was positive that discovery of the lode was only a matter of minutes, he stopped to take his bearings and wipe his overheated face.

Pushing back his hat, he swept his eyes higher, seeking a landmark on the mountainside. The object he sought loomed above, a giant wall of light-colored stone. "Rhyolite-porphyry with lots of quartz showing," he muttered, grinning inside. "Plain as the nose on my face! Well, better get up and get there," he grunted tiredly, reaching for his pick and pan.

His hand paused in midair, frozen above the equipment. He took a step backward and raked the earth with critical eyes. The mound was unmistakably recent and fresh; it was long as a man and wide as a pair of human shoulders. Ben scraped gingerly with the end of his pick. First came a boot, then inevitably a human leg. Ben sat on his heels, wiping chilled sweat off his face. This explained why the ore-bearing trail of float remained untouched. Those Wick hadn't run off, he'd ambushed and killed.

Later, under the sheer cliff of light-colored rock, excitedly pounding white quartz into dust, Ben momentarily forgot the grisly human find. He brushed the white dust into the pan, poured from the canteen, began sloshing the grains and water with practiced panning rythm. Finally, grains and water gone, he was staring at a complete circle of virgin gold.

He did not see the muzzle glinting through a red-stemmed manzanita only a few yards away, nor the quiver of the gunsight following his every move. The dead aim clung, accurately trained at the back of his head, as Ben turned to the wall, oblivious. He chipped off a fragment and turned the precious bit of ore this way and that, examining it.

THE bore of steel glinted, and a determined voice spoke. Startled, Ben almost dropped the ore. He obeyed the firm command and put his hands high, prickles of self-disgust crawling up his spine. What a stupid mistake, getting trapped! He eased his head cautiously, trying to see behind.

A bit of blue moved, showing through the manzanita leaves, and there Millicent was, stepping out. Humiliation scorched his pride. He had been outsmarted by a slip of a girl.

"Face about," she ordered, her eyes flashing. "I thought I told you Bode's spies aren't allowed on our land. Mr. Ferris, you are trespassing on the Rand ranch."

Ben erased a sweat tickle against his sleeve. "I'm mighty glad to hear that, ma'am," he breathed, taking a step forward with the ore.

"Stop!" The toss of the muzzle set him back.

His grin faded before her scorn. "Okay, ma'am, but please look at what I've got." He started turning the rock fragment slowly above his head. She looked, femininely curious. "The fracture, ma'am, shows pure gold. If this is your land, then you own a lot of gold. See that pan on the ground? Look in the bottom and you'll see more gold."

Her eyes flicked down, then up, but remained stern and inscrutable. "Keep your hands up and start walking," she said.

"Why?" Ben asked. "I've got no gun."

"You've got a pick in your belt," she said. "I've seen one of those things kill a chicken at twenty paces—my best laying hen," she recalled in bitterness. "So keep reaching. I don't take chances."

Ben's shame turned to coldness. He'd found her a fortune and she treated him like scum. The unmarked grave appeared beneath his boots as he worked downslope; respectfully. Ben skirted its edges. A thought struck him, and he kept her within his vision. The manner in which she treated that grave would tell a lot. Perhaps she knew it was there?

She noticed his hesitance. "Keep going," she said, moving gracefully, skirts blowing, rifle cocked. She walked over the grave innocently, as though it weren't there.

Suspicion lifted from Ben, but a new fear slid in. At this very moment, Wick could

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be watching them from the shack, plotting revenge and how to do away with them for wrecking his hopes. Closer now, Ben could see Wick's horse drooping at the hitching post, wearing a saddle. That meant that Wick was up and about. Millicent needed his protection terribly, Ben thought, yet witless captured fool that he was, his hands were quite hopelessly fanning the air.

She marched him as far as the range fence. "Keep right on going," she said, "until you reach that horse. Then get in the saddle and go!"

Ben's face flamed. "That's rustling."

His eyes inched uneasily about the mine buildings, half expecting Wick Bode to pop out. What a beautiful setup for a cold-blooded murder! Wick would enjoy shooting him as a horsethief.

Millicent was answering sensibly, "Take the horse as payment for what Bode owes you."

"He'll shoot."

"Get on that horse," she said, "or *I'll* shoot!"

Ben shrugged. Either way, he'd collect a bullet. What hurt most was that Millicent had so utterly fooled him. Who would think that a snub nose and a cute pony tail were the disguise of a killer?

"Ma'am—" he made a final stand, hands still in the air—"remember that gold up there. Lose your land and you'll lose the gold. Better let me stick around in case you need help."

He didn't say "protection." Under the circumstances, it might sound slightly ridiculous, armed as she was with a well-oiled Springfield. But Wick Bode had obviously murdered already, and wouldn't hesitate to do so again to get the gold.

She remained unimpressed. "Ride west, miner, past the Hoolie ranch. And if you see my father driving his herd along, don't stop. He hates a Bode hired hand worse than I do."

Ben's jaws hardened, he dropped his hands and cinched his belt and flung his shoulders back. "You'd be more to my liking," he said, drilling her with a cool look, "if you were a lady and played with an embroidery hoop instead of a gun." Not allowing himself the pleasure of watching her blush, he presented the broad target of his shoulders, strolled lazily to the tethered horse, and vaulted up.

Wick must be drunk or napping, Ben thought, because no bullet sped from behind. As for the girl, Ben couldn't trust himself to look. He shook the mare into a fast trot and veered, not west toward the Hoolie ranch but east toward Middle Butte, in rebellious defiance to her order.

"No woman is going to rule me," Ben muttered, removing his tobacco for consolation. He poured the pungent stuff and drew the pouch string with his teeth, and the woe inside him was as nothing he'd ever suffered in all his life—a gnawing sort of an ache, not like hunger, nor the salt-dryness of thirst, nor disappointment over losing a card game, but the yearning of a suddenly lonely heart.

SUNSET colored the distant cloud of dust moving along the desert floor. Ben narrowed his eyes and calculated that at least five miles lay between it and him. The dust was not wind driven; it hovered patiently over the slow hoofs that were raising it. Millicente's father's herd. She had known it was coming this way, all along.

The hurt dug deeper; she simply hadn't trusted him. The thought was still stinging when he met her father. Rand's tall hat and checkered shirt loomed out of choking dust; he was leading a lamed horse and was footsore and weary himself. Ben dismounted and put out his hand.

"I am Ben Ferris, sir. Are you Mr. Rand?"

The small herd of shorthorns parted and went around, but Rand's hand stayed glued to his side. He nodded at the black-and-white mare.

"That is Bode's horse. I am unarmed. What do you want?"

The bitterness struck Ben almost as hard as the girl's distrust. Having connections with Wick Bode was no way to make friends with the Rands. "Millicent sent me," Ben said, throwing her name in like a flag of truce.

"You lie," Rand said evenly. "Millie and I don't ask for help from anyone." His hands clenched over a sudden thought and he took

(Turn to page 80)

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a menacing step toward Ben. "If any of you loafers have laid a hand on my little girl—"

"Hold it!" Ben interrupted. "Your little girl is back there holding her own in fine style. She even had me clawing the sky. Besides, since the two of you apparently have your signals arranged, I might as well admit that she told me to ride west. I rode east, sir, for a reason that is strictly personal."

A thin smile eased the father's face. "That sounds like my gal! She's got no use for Bode men. Nor have I!" He shouldered past.

"Here, take the horse," Ben urged, "or you'll never reach your place in time."

Rand turned mouth a twist of disdain. "Abandon my herd so you can scatter it? I know a Bode trick when I see one."

He turned his back again and resumed his dogged march. Ben bit his lip. Father and daughter were sure hard to help! "You'll be surprised when you get there!" he shouted. "Better call the sheriff. Someone's dead."

Ben whirled and came back worriedly. "Who is dead?"

"This is no time for a lot of talk," said Ben earnestly. "Your daughter is back there with just a gun and a dog between her and a murderer. I mean Wick Bode." Rapidly, Ben retold his discovery of gold and the body buried beneath the cliff. "I'd have stayed, but she ran me off." Ben extended the reins, and this time the other man took them.

Alone with the herd, Ben milled them to a stop. As the moon brightened, the animals bedded down. Rand's lame horse browsed nearby on shriveled filaree, limping and favoring its shoeless hoof. Ben rolled a cigarette and lay on his back to think.

He must have slept, because the moon was paling before sunrise when galloping bolted him out of a dream. It was Bode's piebald mare again, but this time Millicent was in the saddle. She pulled to a stop, her hair loose, far lovelier than the dream Ben had been dreaming.

"Why did you defy me, Ben Ferris?" she demanded, but without anger.

She'd come to get the herd. Ben would make it to town on foot, nothing gained, nothing lost. Ben asked his own question.

"Why were you unfriendly when I wanted to help?"

Her mouth altered, it became young, unsure. "Ben, I am sorry. But I had to," she said faintly. "I was afraid. If I made a mistake—if I were wrong and you weren't the man you professed to be and the man I thought you were—can't you see, Ben?" she asked softly. "I couldn't take any chances, not when it might cost Dad everything that he's spent years working for."

Ben had drawn closer, was touching the stirrup that held her slender foot. "I understand," he said, and he really did.

A rolling stone without family or suitable background had little to offer a girl like Millicent. The Rands were folk who believed in settling, building, and improving. To them, he was in Wick Bode's rough class, drifting and undependable.

She appeared to be waiting. "Aren't you going to help me down, Ben?"

"I didn't know you wanted to get down." He held a hand for her foot, another at her waist.

She was fumbling with the saddlebag. "Mr. Hoolie was there when Dad got home," she chattered. "They went over to look at Wick Bode's body. They dug up the buried body too. It was a crazy old prospector who must have stumbled on the ore vein by accident."

"Millie!" Ben yelped. "You didn't go and shoot Wilk Bode!"

She went on fussing with the strap. "No, I didn't shoot him. He died from snakebite."

Horror washed through Ben. During the fistfight, Wick must have fallen backward on the dead rattler; a puncture from a crushed fang could have poisoned him.

"Where was the bite?" Ben asked.

"On the shoulder. He was dead when I ordered you to take his horse and get out. I knew Bode couldn't shoot you."

Ben hovered, her small determined shoulders forbidding his hands the touch. "How come you know so much?" he jibed, nettled by her efficiency.

She turned, her face soft and tilted. "In the morning, I didn't see you around the mine. I was afraid Bode had hurt you, so I went to

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look. I found Bode dead. I saddled the horse to ride and tell Mr. Hoolie. Then I saw you up on the ridge."

There was a moment of silence between them; his eyes went over her face like a man spellbound. She'd braved a wicked man's camp, driven by concern for a human life. What a courageous wife she'd make!

The horse moved, stomping, and she drew a quick breath. "Dad wants me to ask you to come back and dig out that gold you say is in our land. But I came to bring you this."

She dug into the saddlebag and whisked out something wrapped in cloth. Ben almost reeled from the whiff of food. She laid out cold rabbit and wedges of buttered light bread, then rose from the offering she'd laid at his feet.

Ben looked from the food to her, wishing fervently that he had the right to speak. Bantering instead, he said, "That deserves a kiss, ma'am. Mind if I do?"

He bent, but she moved her cheek away. His heart fell. But her lips were there instead, and her eyes were shiny and trusting, at last.

Ben took her mouth. It was yielding and warm and unmistakably sweet. His arms wrapped tightly around her. What a wife she'd make!

KNOW YOUR WEST

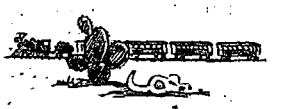
1. Why is the snowshoe rabbit of the high Rocky Mountains so called?

2. Cowboys sometimes call a soogan (or suggan) a parker. What is it?

3. "Commerce of the Prairies," a great historical record of the frontier, especially the Santa Fé Trail, was written by Gen. Lew Wallace, Lewis & Clark, or Josiah Gregg?

4. What is the honored nickname of the First U. S. Volunteer Cavalry, recruited in New Mexico and the Southwest in 1898 and commanded by a colonel who later became president?

5. I heard a rodeo announcer give a roper's time this way: "Jim Bob Altizer tied his calf in 9.3 seconds, but he brought 10 seconds with him from the chute." What did he mean?



6. A rousing western reception was given the first railroad train into Austin in 1872—in the capital of what state?

7. Name three Old West gunmen, whether outlaws or lawmen, named Bill.

8. Now considering quitting the rodeos for TV, what handsome young cowboy has been five times named World's Champion All Round Cowboy? (Initials C. T.).

9. In this list there are five pairs of men who operated more or less as partners in the old West. Can you match them up: Murphy, Goodnight, Adair, Tunstall, Billy the Kid, McSween, O'Folliard, Earp, Dolan and Holliday.

10. What is meant by a skewbald horse?

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 97. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

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"That bell," Johnny said. "I thought it was you who rang it."

GHOST TOWN GALLANT

By Adolph Bennauer

HE LISTENED intently, and, through the soft Arizona night, heard the sound again—the distant, but distinct, tolling of a bell. Johnny Starke wasn't the superstitious type, and he hadn't touched a drop of liquor all day. Moreover, he was sure he wasn't dreaming, for he could feel the steady, jogging movement of the roan beneath him. But what was a church bell doing out here in the middle of the desert?

A BELL WAS RINGING where no bell had any right to be . . .

and Johnny had to find out if it meant a woman was in trouble

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This was unfamiliar territory to Johnny. It was several years since he'd been through here. But he had, at least, a rough idea of his whereabouts. He'd left Morganville at nine o'clock that morning and, according to his calculations, should now be about thirty miles north of there.

He glanced to the eastward, whence the sound seemed to have come, and could make out a range of barren hills against the moonlit sky. He jogged his memory to recall something he knew about those hills, something that would explain the existence of a church bell in that utter desolation. And then, suddenly, it came to him.

"Ophir," he said aloud. "Yeah, the old mining town of Ophir."

But this knowledge merely deepened the mystery. His lean, good-natured face revealed his perplexity. Ophir was a ghost town, abandoned at least twenty years ago. Even though it had boasted a church in its boom days, there was no reason for a church being there now. Minister and congregation had long since departed. Then how come the ringing of the bell?

Johnny pulled the roan up, eased himself in the saddle and lit a cigarette. "This doesn't make sense, Rusty," he said. "We've got plenty of time on our hands. Let's see if we can figure it out."

The trouble with Johnny Starke was that he'd always had plenty of time on his hands. Starting at seventeen, he'd broken broncs, competed in rodeos, and worked for practically every cattle outfit in Arizona. He had worked his way up to being foreman for a few of them, then worked his way down again. Now, at twenty-five, he was without a job of any sort, just drifting.

Of course, there'd been women in his life, but he prided himself that, like his whisky, he could take them or leave them alone. But that affair with Maria Santos, down at Tucson, wasn't so easy to forget. Though it was all over and done with, a vision of her black, slumbrous eyes appeared every now and then to tantalize him. He should have known better than to trust eyes like that.

While he was thinking, he was listening. But the sound of the bell was not repeated. This strengthened his first suspicion. "It's a signal," he told the roan decisively. "Somebody's in trouble over there, trying to get help."

Assuming this to be true, a host of other questions beset him. Who could the person be? What sort of trouble was he in? Why had he stopped sending his signal? The most obvious answers Johnny could think of was that some desert prospector had become sick or injured, taken refuge in the old ghost town, and, while in the act of summoning help, had either passed out or succumbed entirely.

Impulsive by nature, Johnny Starke never hesitated over a hunch. He pinched out his cigarette and caught up the reins. "Well, what are we waiting for, Rusty? Let's get going."

He wheeled his mount sharply and headed for the range of hills at a gallop. Distance was deceptive at night, but he figured the hills to be about three miles away. He could only guess at the exact location of Ophir, for though there was a half moon overhead, the sagebrush was so high that the base of the hills was hidden from his view.

By the time he'd covered half the distance he'd calmed down a bit. Impulse was giving way to reason. Maybe it was the effect of the darkness or the desolation or a combination of both, but he grew a little cagey. No sense in rushing into this thing blindly. He might be mistaken in his guess. He might be riding into trouble.

So he cut down the roan's speed when he neared the hills, and made sure that his old hogleg was resting loosely in its holster. Coming out of the sage, he swept the base of the hills with alert, all-embracing glances. And soon, about half a mile to his left, he made out the old mining town of Ophir.

It lay at the head of a blind draw formed by the slopes of two opposing hills; just a huddle of shacks wrecked almost into ruin by wind and weather, but which had once housed a thousand or more people. At the head of the draw he could see the church, still in fair condition, its steeple standing out starkly, almost forbiddingly, in the moonlight. Johnny felt a strange, tingling sensation along his spine, but managed to shake it off.

But he wasn't riding into that ghost town carelessly, not by a danged sight. For he wasn't the only one who was getting the jit-

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ters. Rusty didn't seem to like the looks of the place, either. He was carrying his head high, blowing a little and bunching his muscles.

"Steady, boy," Johnny said, and touched the butt of his .45 for his own reassurance.

He'd been so cautious in his movements that he was sure he had not yet been seen by anyone in the town. The shortest route to the church, however, was directly up the main street, which would bring him into plain view. Should he take that route, he speculated frowningly, or should he swing to the right?

His speculations ended abruptly. Parked in front of a one-time saloon halfway up the street, he saw an old touring car of the flivver type, its brass radiator gleaming brightly in the moonlight. Was this car part of the ghost town, too, he wondered, or did it belong to the person who had rung the bell? It didn't look old enough to be part of the town, yet if it belonged to the ringer of the bell Johnny would have to change his theory about the latter's identity. Desert rats didn't ride around in automobiles.

He passed a hand across a damp forehead. "I don't like the looks of it, Rusty. It could be that we're sticking our necks out. Still—" his lips tightened— "we asked for it. We've got to see it through."

FIRST, he had to have a closer look at that car. It might tell him a lot of things, might even solve the mystery completely. Edging Rusty over to the shadow of one of the nearer shacks, Johnny left him with reins trailing, and took a roundabout course to the flivver. To his surprise, it was a later model than he had thought, not more than ten years old. But he got a real shock when he touched the radiator. Though the rest of the car was cool, the radiator was burning hot.

And then, before he could recover from that jolt, the night was rent by a scream. Glancing up the street, Johnny saw three people dash across it from the farther side, the one in the lead obviously being pursued by the other two. All wore men's attire, but there was no mistaking the tone of that scream.

"Holy smoke," Johnny gasped. "A dame."

Then they were gone. The darkness between the shacks swallowed them up. Johnny Starke got a grip on himself, and dismissed all further speculations. He knew, now, who had rung that church bell, even if he didn't know exactly why. But that wasn't important any more. All that mattered was that a woman was in distress. In view of that, his course of action was plain.

To be sure, the odds were two to one against him, but his feeling was more one of relief than otherwise. Here was a danger he could actually see and prepare himself to cope with. Though, again, he wasn't going to rush into it blindly. Fixing the exact patch of darkness into which the trio had disappeared, Johnny drew his gun and made his way there cautiously.

It was an empty lot, cluttered with old tin cans, bottles, and similar rubbish. There was no sign of the trio here, no hint as to where they might have gone. But that they had disappeared into one of the shacks on his side of the street, Johnny was confident. The only question was—which one? Since he couldn't answer that question, he faced the task of inspecting them all.

The first shack he came to didn't need inspecting. The roof had caved in and the whole interior was bared to view by the moonlight. The next was similarly exposed, being minus its doors and windows. Five others he tried all in different stages of decay, without any luck. By then he'd covered all the shacks east of the point where the trio had disappeared. There remained only those west of it, one of which was the old saloon where the flivver was.

He was about ready to give up when he reached the saloon. This was evidently the spot from which the pursuit had started and the girl wouldn't be likely to head back that way—that is, not unless she'd been captured. But he was in front of the place then, so he entered anyway. From the open doorway, he could see a bar and mirror at the farther end and a door leading into a back room. That closed door intrigued him. Gun in hand, he tiptoed forward, reached the bar—and stopped cold. A face that was not his own was looking at him out of the mirror.

In a single movement he raised his gun and whirled, his only intention being to get the other man covered. But at the same instant

(Turn to page 86)

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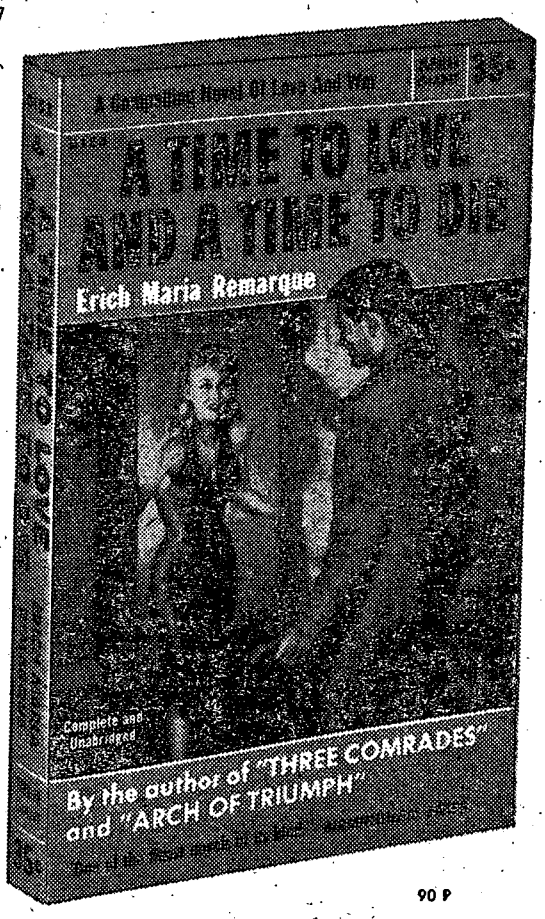
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the other's right foot shot out, collided with the gun, and sent it clattering across the floor. Six feet of bone and muscle hurled itself upon Johnny, overwhelmed him, and brought him down.

A harsh voice said, "Spying on us, eh? Who are you? What're you doing here?"

At that moment the inner door opened, revealing a dimly lighted room behind it, and a gaunt man with eyeglasses appeared in the entry. "Good work, Lew," he said. "Bring him in here. I'll ask the questions."

"Sure, Gene." The big man stood Johnny on his feet, picked up the discarded gun, and said, "You heard him, feller. Get moving."

Johnny went peaceably, knowing the futility of resistance. But he was smarting at his defeat, and at the knowledge that, all the time he was spying, he'd been spied upon himself. Then he was in the dimly lighted room, which, judging from the empty liquor cases lying about, had been used as a storeroom. What he beheld caused him momentarily to forget about himself.

The girl, who couldn't have been more than twenty, sat on one of the liquor cases at the farther end of the room, bound hand and foot. The candle that burned on a box near her illuminated her face faintly, a face that, for all its feminine softness and attractiveness, held no sign of weakness. Pride, anger and resentment showed in her blue eyes, but no tears.

The gaunt man, Gene, eyed Johnny sharply. "Well, start talking. Who are you? What do you want here?"

JOHNNY STARKE had been around, and in his travels had blundered into all sorts of situations. Here was a case of two men holding a young woman against her will. No matter what the reason, they were violating the law. To remind them of this fact would gain him nothing. On the other hand—

"This pal of yours—" he grinned toward the big fellow, Lew— "has a charge like a Brahma bull. Don't know when I've been thrown so fast or so hard. No complaints, though. I figure I'm mighty lucky, at that."

The gaunt man frowned. "What do you mean, lucky? Who are you?"

Johnny reached leisurely for a cigarette, feigning utter indifference to the girl. "M name is Wallace, Jerry Wallace. I just ro up from Morganville. Tried to hold up saloon last night, but the marshal walked on me. I left by the back door and hit trail for this old ghost town to hide out. Wh I saw your flivver on the street I was natur ly worried a bit. Don't think I have any c to feel that way, now. There's room in t town for all of us."

Over his cigarette, he saw the two m glance at each other, and didn't like his terpretation of that glance. He liked even l the scowl that darkened the face of the fellow, Lew. "What saloon?" Lew asked.

"Silver Star."

"Where?"

"Third and Webster."

Once more the two men exchanged glan And this time Johnny breathed a little eas Though they didn't look entirely convinc the promptness of his answers seemed to h them puzzled. The gaunt man eyed steadily through his horn-rimmed glasses. you know what you've walked into here?"

Johnny shrugged. "Looks like a snatch. that's your business, not mine. That is, less—"

"Unless what?" the big fellow prompte

"Unless you let me throw in with you can hold up my end; I always have. An wouldn't squawk about the cut."

There was a moment of silence, while big man leered, Gene drummed on a liq case with his fingertips, and the girl gaze Johnny with an expression of such utter tempt that he felt like sinking through on the weather-widened cracks at his feet.

Then Gene said evasively, "We'll talk al that later—tomorrow maybe. In the m time, I think we can use you. Lew, here, his hands full watching the outside, and got to take the flivver and drop off this som letter—" he touched an envelope in pocket— "at the nearest motor bus stop. W I'm gone, you can sit here and see that girl friend doesn't break away again. Oka

"Suits me," Johnny said. "I've been ri so long I don't mind sitting for a spell." turned to Lew. "Can I have my gun now?"

"You won't need a gun," the big fellow

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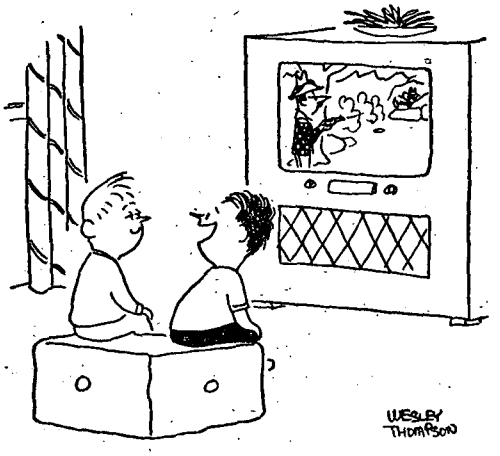
swered dryly, and Johnny knew exactly how he stood with them.

The two left the room together, and shortly thereafter Johnny heard the whir of a self-starter and the grind of gears as the old flivver started down the street. He was bursting with impatience to speak to the girl, but he had a hunch that Lew was still standing with one ear pressed against the door. And Johnny was right. It was a full two minutes before he heard the creak of Lew's departing footsteps.

Immediately, then, Johnny caught the girl's



"That's a new world's record—twelve shots from a six-shooter without reloading!"

eye and held a finger to his lips. "Listen close, miss," he said, "and don't interrupt. This in only an act. My real name is Johnny Starke. I'm just a common cowpoke. I was riding along, minding my own business, when I heard that bell. Figured it might be a signal of distress, so I came over here to investigate. Can you believe that?"

The girl's surprise was tinged with suspicion. But she retained her control. "Come a little closer," she said. "Let me have a good look at your face."

Johnny complied. "It's not much to look at," he admitted grinningly, "but it's honest."

The girl's sharp gaze seemed to turn him inside out. "You're Johnny Starke, all right," she stated, with obvious relief. "I never forget a face."

"You mean you've seen me before?"

"I saw you ride at Tucson last fall."

"Oh." Johnny would rather she hadn't. That dog-goned sunfishing, sidewinding—

"I'm Nancy Leavitt," the girl added quickly. "My dad, Mark Leavitt, owns the Lazy L, about fifty miles east of here. The big fellow outside is Lew Cameron, foreman of the outfit. The other one is Gene Farrell, a confidence man from Baker City. They kidnaped me when I was in town today, and are holding me for fifty thousand dollars ransom."

Johnny gave a low whistle. "Fifty thousand bucks! Well, I guess your father has it, all right. I've heard of the Lazy L. Always thought I'd like to ride for it some day. But how come your foreman got mixed up in this? You'd think a man in a job like that—"

"He was already on his way out of it," the girl broke in spiritedly. "During the last year or so the Lazy L has been missing a lot of steers. Dad finally managed to pick up some across the state line that still showed the imprint of our branding iron. Tracing the matter further, he found plenty of evidence against Cameron. But before he could bring charges, somebody tipped off the foreman."

"I see. Then Cameron contacts Farrell and they pull this kidnaping job, getting revenge and money at the same time. Nice people."

"But they won't get away with it. Dad isn't the type to give in to them."

"Sh." Johnny held up his finger. The sound of pacing in the other room had ceased. But, just as he was about to slip back to his seat at the door, it was resumed. "You're danged right, they won't get away with it," he agreed. "But we won't leave it up to your father to stop 'em. We'll try to do something about it ourselves. And right now is our best chance, while there's only one of 'em on hand."

THE girl's face brightened, then clouded again. "But you haven't any gun. We wouldn't get as far as the front door."

"We won't need any," Johnny said. "I've got a plan. Kind of crazy, but maybe it'll work," He felt his face flushing at the thought in his mind. Nancy Leavitt was a very pretty girl, as pretty as Maria Santos, and a lot more likable and sensible. He hoped she wouldn't

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misunderstand him. "How have they been treating you?" he asked. "They didn't try to get familiar, or anything like that?"

"Well, I should say not." Her tone indicated what her reaction would have been if they had. "Why?"

"That's my plan," Johnny explained, aware that his face was crimson. "I'll put my arm around you and pretend to be petting you. Then you scream real loud and start fighting me. That'll bring Cameron in here on the double quick."

The girl looked at him closely, her own face flushing. But her probing eyes saw no trace of guile, only sincere purpose and embarrassment. "Well, what then? He'll have his gun out when he comes in, and we'd be no match for him, even if I were free."

"Of course not. That's what I want him to think, too. We're just laying a trap for him, Miss Leavitt, and I think he's dumb enough to walk into it. Will you try it? We haven't too much time."

The girl tossed her head. "I think it's silly. But I'll do it if you really feel it'll help."

Johnny Starke performed then what he considered the most daring and most delightful act of his life. He knelt down beside Miss Leavitt, put his arm around her, and pressed his cheek close to hers. The contact was devastating. Maria Santos and Lew Cameron and everybody and everything else faded into the background.

He was hardly conscious of the girl's screams, of her violent resistance; was brought back to reality only when the door was kicked open and he saw Cameron standing, gun in hand, in the entrance.

"What's going on in here?" Cameron's tone was sharp with mistrust. The candlelight was no brighter than the moonlight in the other room, and it took him a second or two to get the picture. When he did, he holstered his gun, strode forward, and jerked Johnny to his feet. "Let that girl alone," he bellowed. "What do you think you're doing, anyway?"

Johnny backed off with a sheepish grin. "Aw, just trying to be friendly. But I guess she's not the friendly kind. Well, there're plenty of others."

"Then save your play for them," Cameron shot back. "We have no time for such foolishness here. Your only job is to see that she doesn't get away again. Understand?"

"All right, all right." Johnny looked a little resentful. "Don't let me keep you from your own job."

Cameron glared at him a moment, then turned and stalked disgustedly from the room. Again, Johnny waited for those pacing footsteps, heard them, and stepped quickly back to the girl's side.

"You did swell, Miss Leavitt. So far, it's worked fine. Now comes the real test. Hold still while I untie you."

The girl was breathing tensely. "I'm beginning to understand. We're going to try it again, and this time it'll be a showdown—if he does what you expect him to."

"He will," Johnny said carelessly, though there was a fluttery sensation in the pit of his stomach.

She looked directly at him. "You'll be risking your life, Johnny."

He liked that. "It's not worth fifty thousand bucks," he returned grinningly. He removed his hat and coat and draped them beside her. At first glance, in that dimly-lighted room, the deception was perfect. "All set?" he asked.

"All set."

He went back to the door, picked up a liquor case of suitable size and weight, and held it in readiness. "Let's go."

If Miss Leavitt's acting had been good before, she improved upon it now. In her screams was all the fear and loathing and anger she could muster. The effect was definite and immediate. There was the sound of a curse from outside, the pound of approaching footsteps. The door was thrown violently open and Lew Cameron, fists doubled, strode into the room.

"I thought I told you to stop that!"

He was halfway across the room before he discovered the deception. With an oath, he stopped and reached for his gun. But Johnny was right behind him then, the heavy box upraised. Before Cameron could draw, he brought the box down upon the foreman's head. A hundred and eighty pounds of bee and bone thumped to the floor, out cold.

"Well, that's that." Johnny bent and fel Cameron's pulse. "Okay," he said, retrieve

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his own gun, and thrust Cameron's under his belt. "Now, let's have that rope, Miss Leavitt."

She brought it to him, together with his hat and coat. Despite the intense strain, she was in complete control of herself. She said warmly, "Nancy to you, Johnny. And thanks a lot. I won't forget this."

Johnny felt himself flushing again.

She said, "I wish Dad could have seen you when you jumped Cameron. Maybe he'd have changed his mind about you."

Johnny winced a little. "You mean he saw me at Tucson, too?"

"Yes, but he wasn't referring to your riding. He was referring to you as a man. You have no stability, no ambition, he said. He'd heard about you from the Shadow F and Box O outfits. You used to be foreman for both of them, then just drew your pay and drifted. How come, Johnny?"

JOHNNY finished with Cameron's wrists, got up and put on his hat and coat. He wished she wouldn't keep looking at him like that. "Well," he said awkwardly, "I guess there just wasn't anything to hold me. A man needs something more than wages to keep him on a job. But come on, we'd better be getting out of here while the getting's good."

Both heard the sound at the same instant—the sputtering exhaust of an approaching automobile. "Farrell," the girl gasped, then recovered herself quickly. "Give me one of those guns, Johnny. I know how to use one, believe me."

Johnny handed her Cameron's gun. "This s only in case he gets me first," he said. "You tay right where you are. I'll go out and ry to take him by surprise. Maybe there won't be any need for shooting at all."

He transferred his own gun from its holter to his coat pocket, and was out of the door before she could answer. Passing quickly hrough the outer room, he reached the front f the building just as the flivver braked to stop. He'd expected to see Farrell leave the ar immediately, and to get the drop on him s he came through the door. But Farrell still at at the wheel, fumbling with the ignition witch.

"Everything's okay, Lew," Farrell called. "I beat the bus to the station and gave the letter to the driver. Leavitt ought to get it by tomorrow noon."

Johnny thought fast. If Farrell didn't hear his partner answer, he might get suspicious. Aware that his gun was concealed, Johnny showed himself in the doorway.

"Lew's in the back room with the girl," he said. "He claimed he was tired walking up and down and asked me to spell him for a while. Reckon he'll be relieved to see you."

The fumbling noise in the car ceased. Farrell faced sharply toward the doorway. He didn't make a very good target in the darkened interior of the car, and Johnny held his breath. But evidently his story was believed, for the car door started to open. And, just as it did so, there came a muffled, but audible, yell from the inner room.

"Look out, Gene. He's doublecrossed us."

There was the sound of a blow, and his words ended abruptly. Good girl, Johnny thought: But the damage was done. Farrell must already have had his gun in his hand for, before Johnny could spring back, there was a thunderous report from the car. A slug splintered the door casing just above his head. His own gun answered as he dropped to his knees, but he heard only the sound of a shattered windshield.

He thought fast again. This haphazard firing could go on indefinitely. He didn't want that because, sooner or later, Nancy Leavitt would get in on it. The only way to speed things up was for one of the two to rush the other. Farrell was pretty well screened in his car and didn't seem willing to do this. That left it up to Johnny himself.

He calculated his chances. It was approximately fifty feet from the doorway to the car. No good, he decided. Farrell would cut him down before he got halfway. His eyes swept the walls of the room, but there were no windows by which he might leave unobserved. Desperately, he glanced back at the car. If only there were some way he could force Farrell to—

He caught his breath. It seemed a crazy idea, though not any crazier than the one he'd used to outwit Cameron. He steadied himself, spoke with deadly calm.

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"Listen, Farrell. My gun is pointing straight at your gas tank. I'm giving you till the count of ten to come out with your hands up. If you don't, I'm going to put five hot slugs into that tank, and blow you higher than the church steeple. I'm starting to count right now."

Dead silence. He began his count, got up to eight. Then the car door opened and Farrell stepped out. He approached slowly, his gun in its holster, his hands up. But there was a stealth about his movements that Johnny didn't like. He kept angling to one side, as if to get a full view of Johnny. Halfway to the door, his right arm dropped, not more than a foot. A derringer slipped out of his sleeve and, along with its staccato report, Johnny felt something like a whitehot iron sear his cheek.

The derringer spoke again, but Johnny wasn't there. From a squatting position, he pumped two shots into Farrell's body, saw him stumble, sway dizzily a moment, then fall. He waited a spell, heard Farrell groan, but saw no movement. When he went out, he found the man unconscious. One slug had ploughed across his ribs, the other was imbedded in his chest.

"Is he—is he—"

Johnny looked up, to find the girl beside him. "He's pretty badly hurt," he said, "but he'll be all right as soon as we can get him to a doctor." He glanced toward the flivver. "Now that we've got a car, we ought to make it to Baker City in a couple of hours. Want to give me a hand with him?"

They carried Farrell over to the car and laid him upon the back seat. "We'll untie Cameron's ankles and let him carry himself over," Johnny said. "Sorry about Rusty, but he'll have to trail along the best he can."

The girl looked at him suddenly with startled eyes. "Why, Johnny, there's blood on your face. You're hurt."

Johnny felt of his cheek and winced. "That's right, I remember now. But forget it. It's nothing but a scratch."

The girl wiped some of the blood away with her handkerchief. "We're not forgetting it, Johnny. We're not forgetting anything about you. And when I say *we*, I mean Dad, too. He's a cantankerous old rascal, but after he learns what you've done tonight I think he'll change his mind about you. I think he'll agree that you'll make a far better foreman than Lew Cameron."

Johnny blinked at her. "Huh?"

Her chin went up. "What's the matter are you afraid of honest work? This is your big chance. It almost seems as if Fate brought us together. Or do you feel that there isn't sufficient incentive at the Lazy L to keep you there?"

Johnny felt a trifle dizzy. "Gosh, no." He paused, as a sudden clarion sound broke upon the night—the ringing of the bell in the old church steeple. Remembering that other time he had heard it, he stared with puzzled eyes at the girl. "That's what brought us together," he said. "That bell. All the time I thought it was you who rang it."

Perplexity was in the girl's eyes too. "No I didn't ring it. I heard it, though, when I was a prisoner in that back room. Cameron and Farrell heard it, too, and Cameron went out to investigate. When he came back, he made some explanation to Farrell in the front room that I didn't catch, and that was the end of it."

It might be the end for those two, Johnny thought, but not for him. The irony of it piqued, exasperated him. After all he'd gone through this night, he still hadn't solved the mystery of the signal that had brought him here. It was too much for his peace of mind.

"If it's the last act of my life," he said, "I'm going to find out who or what has been ringing that bell. Farrell and Cameron can wait. Come on."

Together, they ran up the street to the old church. Together they climbed the short flight of steps and entered the vestibule. And there they stopped short, staring at a shaggy little burro that was nibbling away at a creeper vine which had grown up through the floor and twined itself around the dangling bell rope.

Nancy laughed softly. "There's the F. that brought us together, bless his little heart."

Johnny felt a bit foolish. But, somehow his hand found Nancy's and closed upon it. "That goes for me, too," he said.

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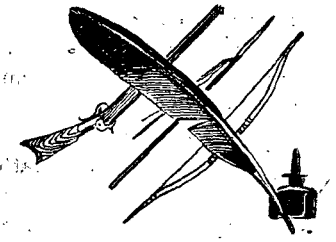

Sequoia

a true story by

Burton L. Wollenzien

MANY years ago a Cherokee Indian girl married a Swedish trader. While they lived together happily for a while, the man eventually became homesick for his native land. Leaving his Indian wife behind, he went to Sweden to see his people, never fulfilling his promise to return to America. When a son was born to the Indian girl, she consulted the chief of her tribe as to the Cherokee name for "guest," and the child was named "Sequo-yah".

The child lived the normal life of an Indian boy, without any education, and lacking the ability to read or write. At the age of 20 years he asked his mother to tell him what the difference was between the white man and the red man. This talk with his mother brought out many things of interest, but the thing which impressed him most was the fact that the white man talked more than the Indian, and used more words.

Sequo-yah came to the conclusion that the white man had progressed further than the Indian because the white man could profit by the knowledge of others, even of people who had been dead a long time.

Believing that his people might rise much higher in the scale of civilization if they could read and write Sequo-yah began a study of speech. After long and patient study, he finally decided that "sound" was the key to construction of a language.

Noting the presence of vowels and consonants in the spoken Cherokee language, Sequo-yah was able, in 1821, to complete an alphabet of eighty-six characters. With its help, a Cherokee Indian child could learn to read and write his native language in a very short time.

It is said that shortly after the official acceptance of the alphabet, every member of the tribe was able to read and write. A printing press was set up and the news of the day was printed in Cherokee. The tribal laws and the Christian Gospel have also been printed in that language.

After teaching his tribe, Sequo-yah worked out a language which other tribes could use, and when he was an old man he started out to visit all the Indian tribes, to teach them. No one knows where he died, or where he was buried.

When the tract of land in California, covered with giant redwood trees, was made a National Park, it was decided to give the park and the trees the name of a famous Indian. It was also decided that they would not be named for a warrior, but rather for a teacher. So they were named "Sequoia." There is also a particular tree in that park named "Chief Sequoia."

These redwoods are the oldest and largest living things in the world, most of them having been living, growing trees back in 1,000 B. C. Many of these trees have attained heights up to 350 feet, and diameters at their bases of up to forty feet.

A good-sized redwood may contain enough lumber to build forty five-room bungalows. At one time these trees covered large sections of land in California, but lumber barons from the East wantonly destroyed so many redwoods it was feared the species might be exterminated. The government had to step in to put a stop to this wholesale destruction.

It is fitting that these magnificent trees should be a monument to an Indian who brought glory to his tribe, not on the battlefield, but by giving them the means of acquiring a written and readable language.

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Crying, Linda cradled the marshal's head in her lap

The Fastest Gun

By Al Storm

FOR two days wind had howled down across the Hump, firing a skiff of snow along the frozen street, like so much white birdshot; but today was clear, cold, and the smoke from Lodestone's chimneys was rising straight up. On the west side of the street, Joe McIntook rubbed a clear place on the frosted window glass and peered out, in time to see Marshal Sandy Dahlsten pass. Dahlsten caught glimpse of him and nodded; McIntook did not move. The marshal's mackinaw was buttoned over his cartridge belt, and his hands were red from cold. Those hands will be stiff and unmanageable, McIntook thought swiftly.

McIntook laughed without making a sound, and moved back among his type cases to the bed he had made up weeks before and over

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McINTOOK FOUND words handier than a gun in his scheme to kill the man who had stolen his girl. . . .

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which he labored daily, removing this word, altering that, polishing the composition with loving care. He ran a copy and stood reading. "Sandy Dahlsten, our quick-shooting town marshal, finally met his match."

A sound on the walk outside reached McIntook. He swiftly crumpled the page and tossed it into the stove, watching until the sheet was consumed before closing the stove and turning to his regular pursuits as editor and publisher of the Lodestone *Weekly Argus*.

Downstreet, Sandy Dahlsten paused on the corner, chatted briefly with grocer Timothy—who was sweeping out his doorway—and then cut diagonally across the street toward the Beacon Cafe. It was in Dahlsten's mind that the cold was too severe for Linda to venture out; but he stepped inside and immediately saw her sitting at a far table. He crossed toward the table where Linda Darrell was seated and said with sincere pleasure, "Hello, Linda. Up kind of early, aren't you? I thought you slept all day so you could stay up all night."

Linda Darrell smiled and allowed the town marshal to have his joke. Her hours as singer and dancer at Whitey's Imperial Saloon ostracised her in a society which limited legitimate endeavor to daylight hours only. That she was clean as any, and more honest than most, few other than Dahlstein could conceed.

Dahlsten sat down across from her, and she said, "What's new with Lodestone's famous gun marshal?"

Sandy Dahlsten flushed. "You've been reading the paper again!"

Linda nodded, no longer bantering. She leaned forward. "'Our marshal did it again, disarmed two men—'" she quoted. "'Dahlsten found another man who was foolish enough to go against him.' Sandy Dahlsten arrested a man suspected of robbery and murder. The suspect made a play for his gun, but Dahlsten was too quick for him.' Sandy," Linda cried, "why do you let him get away with it?"

"Coffee, Bert," Dahlstein said to the cafe man, and then looked at Linda and shrugged. "It's his job to print a paper. Maybe he thinks embroidering the facts make better reading."

"And you like it?"

"You know better than that."

"Yes, I suppose I do," Linda admitted softly. "Just as I know you're an average, run-of-the-mill man with a job you're working at. But who else knows?" Her voice rose. "Joe McIntook is mailing copies of his paper all over the country. He's building you up as something you're not!"

"He wants you to be proud, Linda," Dahlsten said, and this time it was her turn to flush. She muttered, "The grubby little man." Dahlstein grinned, and Linda Darrell sipped at her coffee to regain composure.

Dahlsten enjoyed watching her in moments like these. Linda Darrell was a slim, dark woman with fiery eyes and shining jet hair. She was what he wanted in a woman—and what Joe McIntook wanted; and therein lay the root of it all. Joe McIntook had openly courted Linda from the day she had descended the stagecoach to become Whitey's most popular entertainer.

That she should ultimately favor a common cowhand from the Boxed Cross ranch was a factor Joe McIntook just could not understand. But it had happened. To show his good sportsmanship, McIntook had built up Sandy Dahlsten in his newspaper from the day the village council first offered the cowboy the badge of town marshal. When the facts did not warrant bragging, McIntook blandly manufactured facts to suit until, according to the Lodestone *Weekly Argus*, there were no routine chores attendent on being town marshal of Lodestone.

Each drunken saddle tramp led away to sleep it off became a dangerous gunman casually jailed; simple advice to a stranger to check his gun before attending a village dance became a grim challenge Dahlsten had successfully backed up.

IN A sly way, Dahlsten supposed, Joe McIntook was needling him; but he ignored it as he ignored Joe McIntook. Now he grinned, waiting for Linda to look at him.

She said abruptly, "You know he's trying to get you killed!"

Dahlsten started, "Why, Linda, McIntook wouldn't—"

Linda impatiently got to her feet. The street door opened to admit a tall, slope-

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shouldered man in a bright striped blanket coat and a sombrero, tied down with his bandanna. Linda faltered, and Dahlstein glanced quickly at the man.

He did not know him and, after a casual scrutiny, dismissed him for the time being. "Is something wrong, Linda?" he queried.

"No!" Linda Darrell shook her head.

She did not again glance toward the newcomer, but Dahlsten had the uncomfortable feeling that she was vibrantly aware of each move the man made as he unbuttoned his coat, rubbed his hands briskly, and called for a cup of coffee.

The man glanced toward them. Noting the badge showing under Dahlsten's loose mackinaw, the man said casually, "It's cold out."

Dahlsten nodded without speaking. Linda was more her normal self now; Dahlsten watched her covertly. Something about the appearance of this stranger had startled her, and Dahlsten gave thought to how very little he really knew about her. Before Whitey's, she had entertained at some spot in Denver; probably there had been other places before that.

Dahlsten had given no more thought to her past than he had thought about the unknown fingers that had stitched the seams of his mackinaw, or sewed the buttons on his shirt. Linda was here, now, embodying all that he wanted in a woman; he did not concern himself speculating about what had gone before.

He offered, "I'll walk with you," and noted the eagerness with which Linda accepted. More gently, he said, "if you want me to hang around—"

"No, just walk with me to the Imperial."

He was certain now that something was wrong. The stranger was warming his hands about the thick crockery of the coffee cup, paying them no attention. Dahlsten studied him for a moment. Then Linda nudged him, indicating that she was ready to leave. He followed her from the cafe.

On the street outside, the stranger's horse stood with its head lowered as though nearly done in. It was humped with chill, and Dahlsten had a moment's hope that the rider intended only to pause and warm up before riding on. He considered asking Linda outright whether she knew the man, then decided against it. He tried to banter with her, but she was a dead weight against the attempt, and Dahlsten gave it up.

They came to a sidestreet, and crossed, and went on two doors before coming to the deep inset which marked the front of Whitey's Imperial Saloon. Linda started in; Dahlsten grasped her arm.

"I'm not extra fast with a gun, Linda, but I'm a good shot," he said soberly. "And I'll tackle any man alive with my fists if you say the word. You needn't worry."

Linda Darrell looked at him strangely. "Don't over-rate yourself," she said bitterly. "McIntook's rubbish doesn't make you a gunfighter."

Dahlsten was hurt; he felt an instant flare of irritation. Holding the hurt and the anger deep down, he said, "I'd like to help, Linda."

"Then go home, Sandy, and stay there."

Bewildered, Dahlsten stared dumbly, hoping that she would offer explanation, that she would soften the sting of the words. But Linda turned and vanished inside the Imperial without speaking.

She knew that he wasn't good enough, Dahlsten thought. Whatever her trouble, she thought it beyond his ability to handle. He faced about, regarding the shivering horse at the rack before the Beacon Cafe. He might boldly confront the stranger and question his intentions; on second thought, Dahlsten knew that such action was not his idea of the manner in which a lawman should act. Lodestone was not a mecca for outlaws; he had no reason to suspect a man who might just have ridden in to get warm. He strode to the corner, crossed the street, and began walking up the far side, feeling certain that somehow he had failed Linda Darrell when she needed him most.

When Dahlsten was opposite McIntook's print shop, the door opened and Joe McIntook stood in the doorway. "Saw a stranger ride into town," McIntook called happily. "A new citizen come to make his home, do you suppose, marshal? Wonder what he wants?"

Dahlsten wrenched his thoughts back into focus and regarded McIntook sourly. "If he

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reads your paper, there's no telling what he expects to find," Dahlsten said bluntly. "Sunshine and flowers, maybe."

McIntook's fleshy lips peeled back in soundless laughter. "You sound as though you thought my reporting unreliable," he mocked.

Dahlsten made a half turn and faced the printer squarely. Ink was on McIntook's hands and at the corner of one eye, where he had gouged a knuckle. McIntook was old enough to be Linda's father, Dahlsten thought, and he was aware then of how much he actually disliked the man.

"It isn't libel if I tell only good about a man," McIntook pointed out.

Dahlsten snapped, "Tell any bad and I'll break your damned neck!" He strode away, leaving McIntook with a shock of fright in his red-rimmed eyes.

SELF-RETURNING HORSES

BACK in the old mining days in Colorado, the "self-returning horse" was used to transport men into the mining areas. Miners rented these horses in town and rode them up into the hills. Upon reaching their destination, they tied the reins to the saddle horn and let them go.

That meant the animal's work was done, and the horses knew it. Many a walking miner tried to get a free ride, by catching one of these horses as they jogged back down the trail toward home, but the horses always bolted. If a man wanted a ride, he got aboard at the proper place or not at all.

Some of these horses developed certain prejudices, either naturally or through training. In Ouray, Colorado, a horse named Gray Fox was taught to dislike men carrying gunny sacks. He would let the man mount at the barns, but as soon as the city limits were left behind, the horse would buck off his rider.

Whenever a miner appeared at the stables carrying a container of liquor, the stablemen would mount him on Gray Fox, after carefully placing the liquor in a gunny sack and tying it to the saddle horn. A short time later Gray Fox would return minus his rider, but with the gunny sack and its contents still intact.

The delighted stable men wasted no time before unloading the "cargo" and hiding it in one of the stalls. When the disgusted miner limped back into town looking for another horse, he would be told that Gray Fox had lost the gunny sack somewhere along the trail.

——Janet Sands

AT THE Imperial, Linda Darrell changed and came back on the floor. She exchanged words with Mac, who was tending bar during the quiet of day, then walked back and sat at a table where she could watch the door. Ultimately it would come—and it did. She saw the bright blanket coat and sombrero at the door. The stranger saw her, held her glance for a time, and, when no recognition came, crossed to the bar. He ordered a drink and downed it, then took his second glassful and walked slowly toward her.

"I'm lonely, kid," he said for the barman's benefit, and slid into the chair across from Linda.

Raising the glass to his lips, he said softly, "It's been a long time, kid."

Linda nodded. Mac was regarding the stranger, and she smiled, touching the black hair that was drawn tight in a bun behind her head. Presently Mac lost interest; she leaned forward.

"Roy—"

The stranger grinned. "I thought you knew me."

"I did, but I couldn't let on."

"Naturally, with you having coffee with a lawman and all." The stranger chuckled. He removed his sombrero and laid it on the table. Without the hat his face appeared younger, wildly rash, without a tempering of experience to give it full strength. "I looked for you in Denver."

"I came here two years ago. You were in—"

"In jail," the stranger said calmly. "I broke out." He leaned forward, the blanket coat loosening and coming apart to show the low slung gun at his thigh. "What's with you and this fancy-gun lawman, sis?"

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Linda glanced quickly toward the front. Mac was watching again, and she restrained the impulse to reach for Roy's hand. "He isn't gun-fancy, Roy," she murmured, fighting to keep a smile on her face for Mac to see. "I love him. We plan to be married soon."

Roy leaned back, staring suspiciously across the table. "Are you stringing me? Broady told me he read in a Kansas City paper where this guy is the fastest thing since—"

"No! You've got to believe me, Roy." Linda leaned toward him, grasping his hand, forgetful of Mac. "He's just a common cowman. When I first came here, he was working for a rancher out west of town."

The stranger grinned. "Like him, don't you, sis?" He got up, crossed to the bar to have his glass refilled, and came back.

"You can't kill him, Roy," Linda begged. "Please."

Roy raised his glass, and squinted at its contents judiciously. "There aren't many guns faster than Roy Darrell," he said slowly. "I'd make more money if there weren't any." He looked across the table, not smiling. "In my business, a man gets paid according to how good he is. Nothing personal, sis, but this guy's rep is worth money to me."

"Roy—"

"Nothing personal, sis: I told you that." Roy nodded and tossed off his drink. "Now let's talk about something else—old times, say."

Linda felt her stomach pushing up against her lungs, so that she couldn't speak. She felt sick. She said, "I'll tell him who you are. I'll tell him you're wanted in Colorado."

"And Texas and Arizona," he added lightly. "Probably in California, too, if they know for sure who it was did certain jobs." Roy Darrell laughed, reached over, and chucked her gently under the chin with one knuckle. "I'm fond of you, sis. If there were any other way—" He watched her face for a time, then said, "You just can't understand, can you? Don't try to get up! As long as I'm here talking to you, I'm not out prowling the street. Or do you want your friend to come and try to arrest me?" He laughed, and Linda sagged hopelessly.

THE stranger had been in the saloon for quite a while; he had moved his horse to the rail just to the right of the doorway, and now was inside having his drinks and getting ready—or maybe, as Joe McIntook hoped, just waiting. Dahlsten's brusqueness had chilled McIntook; he had backed inside and bolted the door, and only after hovering about the red-hot stove for some minutes had he thawed enough to loosen and feel resentful. McIntook had been in the West a long time; he knew that men normally cared well for their horses, and so viewed with interest the care with which the stranger had left his mount where it would be readily available.

McIntook carefully wiped clean the type of the special edition he was readying. He moved to the window and peered out, scrubbing impatiently when his breath clouded the glass. The horse was still there, and Dahlsten was somewhere to the extreme north end of the street. McIntook forced himself to stand quietly, but his lips were drawn back. He returned to the composition that would be Sandy Dahlsten's requiem in prose.

He ran off another copy and regarded it tenderly. It was his best, he thought, needing but the addition of a name and a few pertinent facts, which he would be able to gather in three minutes' time. Impatience began building inside him; he had hoped, and waited and planned, for so many weeks, the appearance of any stranger in town set his fingers to trembling uncontrollably.

McIntook walked back to the window, and shivered from the chill there. But he was unable to remain away from his peephole. He saw the mackinaw-bundled figure of Sandy Dahlsten on the other side of the street. While he watched, Dahlsten touched his sombrero to a passing lady, and McIntook was gleefully conscious of the cold redness of Dahlsten's fingers.

The marshal moved on, passing the Beacon Cafe, and McIntook could no longer watch from his cleared place on the window. He moved hastily to the door, opened it a fraction of an inch, and peered out. Dahlsten neared the Imperial, slowed to regard the stranger's horse, then turned inside.

There was no breath in McIntook now.

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He gripped the door as though to keep from falling, his mouth open, his attention riveted on Whitey's Imperial Saloon. His tortured lungs clamored, and McIntook finally drew breath, reluctantly, less the rasp of air through his nostrils prevent his hearing. A shot resounded from inside the Imperial thudding hollowly across the frozen street.

McIntook flung the door wide. He plunged out into the cold and raced toward the saloon. His fingers fumbled a short stub of pencil from his pocket; he clasped a folded sheet of paper. One shot, he thought. One shot! Dahlsten's cold-numbed fingers would not have allowed him that finesse.

Inside the Imperial, McIntook drew a deep breath, smelling the acrid powder smoke with relish. He blinked, peering about the hushed room, and then saw Dahlsten flat on his back on the floor. The blanket-coated stranger stood watchfully some ten feet to one side; Linda Darrell cradled Dahlsten's head in her lap, crying as she stared upward at the stranger.

McIntook abruptly was conscious of the stranger's attention whipping toward him, and he cried, "I'm editor of the Lodestone *Argus*. All I want is an accounting of what's happened. Otherwise I'm strictly neutral in this."

The stranger laughed in manner that sent a chill down McIntook's spine. "You call this marshal fast?" the stranger queried. "You think he amounts to something? Hell, I've seen farm boys from Missouri who were better the first time they belted on a gun."

Something was wrong here. The stranger was mad at him. McIntook trembled, and dropped his pencil. His face was greasy with sweat; his mouth hung open, and he couldn't help it. "I never said—" he whined.

"Your paper did!" the stranger snapped. "I read it, and I made a long cold ride up here, only to find I've been made a fool of." The stranger half turned, looked knowingly at Linda, and faced about before McIntook noticed. "You print anything more about how fast Dahlsten is, and I'll come back and show you some real shooting. Only you won't be around to write about it!"

"I won't," McIntook quavered. He took heart then, remembering. He said, "With Dahlsten dead, there's no reason to."

The stranger glanced toward the bar. "Leave that gun under the counter and walk away with your hands where I can see them!" When Mac had moved down the bar, the stranger backed toward the door. "He isn't dead—isn't even badly hit," the stranger said. "It didn't take much to beat him; he's no gun-hawk."

"Thanks, Mister," Linda called.

The stranger backed from sight.

McIntook looked down. Dahlsten's shoulder looked messy, but his eyes were open. He was looking up at Linda. While McIntook watched, Linda bent over the marshal and kissed him. McIntook became violently sick.

"Damn miserable coward!" Mac stormed angrily. "Take yourself outside! Think I want to be scrubbing up after you?"

As though McIntook were any common saddlebum, Mac grabbed him by the collar and shoved him out the door. At the end of the street, the stranger looked back once, and then kept riding. McIntook became sick again.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 81)

1. Because its large, hairy feet enable it to travel on top of deep snow, like a man on snowshoes.
2. A quilt or bed comfort.
3. Josiah Gregg.
4. Rough Riders, commanded by Teddy Roosevelt.
5. He meant that Jim Bob was fined 10 seconds by the judges for breaking the barrier too soon in coming out of the chute after his calf, thus making his official time 19.3 instead of 9.3 seconds.
6. Texas.
7. Bill Hickok, Curly Bill Brocius, Bill Longley, Billy the Kid, Captain Bill McDonald, Bill Tilghman, Bill Doolin and many others.
8. Casey Tibbs.
9. Murphy and Dolan, Goodnight and Adair, Tunstall and McSween, Billy the Kid and O'Folliard, Earp and Holliday.
10. Cowboys use "skewbald" to describe a horse with patterns of white on any color except black, but it may mean any paint horse.

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THE DREAM has become a reality. The Cowboy Hall of Fame has actually been established, and the dedication ceremonies were held in Oklahoma City on Veteran's Day.

Will Rogers, Jr., was the master of ceremonies, and Gov. Raymond Gary of Oklahoma was the principal speaker, reminding everyone of the cowboy's great contribution to the splendid history of the West and the whole country.

It was an exciting occasion, but there's still a long way to go before you and I can buy our tickets and visit this million dollar memorial to the cowboys of yesterday and today. The Hall of Fame is, so far, only a vacant lot.

The speech-making went right on into the next day. Between halves of the Oklahoma-Iowa football game at Norman, the first five nominees to be honored in the hall were announced to the crowd. It's a selection few people could argue with, since it includes great and famous men in other fields, as well as the everyday working cowboy.

President Theodore Roosevelt was the first named. That's a proud choice for Westerners, and an honest one, too, because Teddy was a cowboy at one point in his career, and a booster of the cattle business. He was a rodeo fan as well, and a visitor at the Cheyenne Frontier Days rodeo.

Will Rogers was sure to be chosen, since he was just about the best-loved figure people ever associated with the West. He could spin a rope and ride a horse, but more than anything else he established the idea of the cowboy that America loves—a drawling, soft-spoken humorous man with plenty of tough common sense behind his wit.

The other three nominees are Charlie Goodnight, an early trail driver; Jake McClure, an early champion rodeo cowboy; and Charles Russell, a cowboy artist from Montana. We'll tell you more about these three in future issues.

To us, it seems like a fine selection of men to take the first five places of honor in the Hall of Fame. Hundreds of others will follow them and will find a niche where their immortality will be safe.

So the first ceremonies are over, and now there's work to be done—a little matter of wood, bricks, mortar, plaster, and paint—before these five and their colleagues can be enshrined.

There are eight modern cowboys to keep your eye on at the moment. They are leading in the races for point award champions, as the year ends and the results are being added up. Two cowboys look like shoo-ins—Dean Oliver in calf-roping and Jim Shoulders in bull-riding. They both lead their fields by about 7,000 points, an insuperable advantage at this stage in the game.

The others are less secure in the Number One spot. Less than 200 points separated Deb Copenhaver and Casey Tibbs in saddle bronc on November 1, and only 500 points were between the Combs brothers, Benny and Willard, in steer wrestling. Eddy Ackridge had 1,500 more than Jack Buschbom in bareback, and Vern Castro and Shoat Webster had small leads in team roping and steer roping.

The all-around championship looks as though it's in Casey Tibbs's pocket, because second-place Jim Shoulders has 2,000 points to overcome, but a little luck could make the difference—just as a little luck for Casey could really sew up the award for him this year.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

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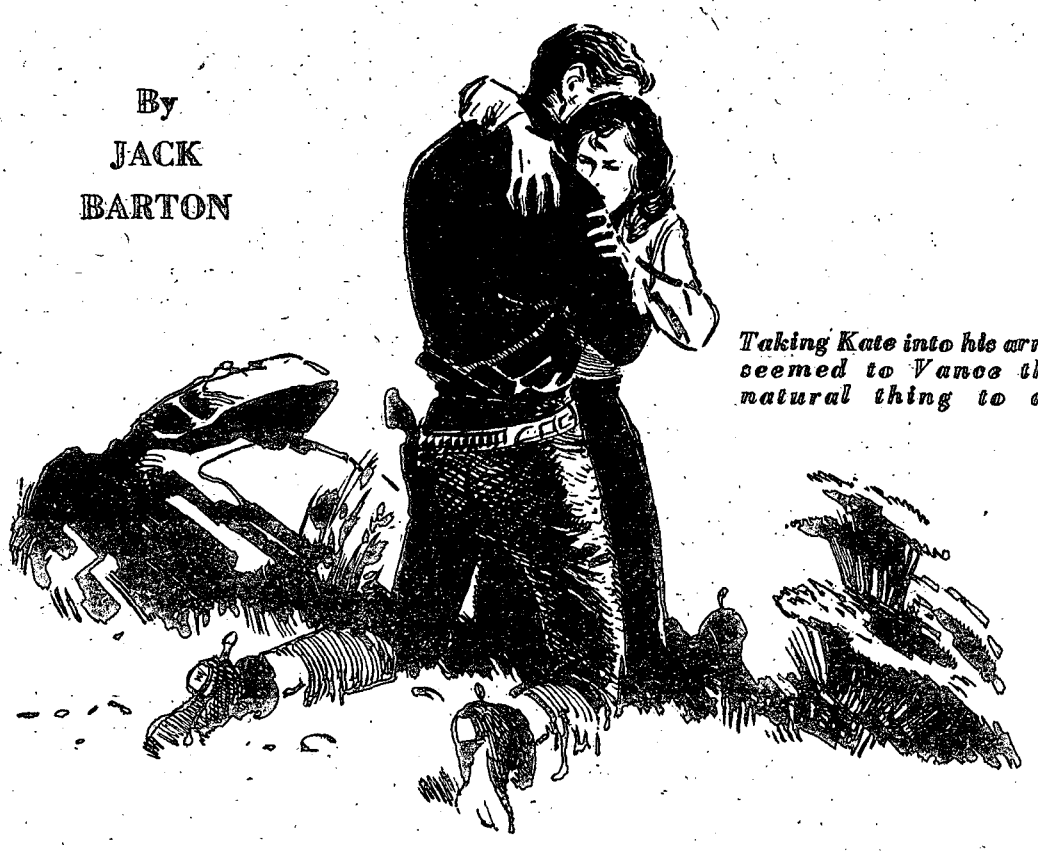
Gun in His Hand

By JACK BARTON



Taking Kate into his arms seemed to Vance the natural thing to do

THE STORY SO FAR: Rancher WILL VANCE's fight with Mexican dandy ARAGON ends with Vance killing Aragon, but he still has the latter's father, powerful bandit JOSE DURANGO, to reckon with. Vance's other quarrel, with JOHN BELDEN, who covets Vance's water supply, reaches an uneasy compromise when Belden buys a half-interest in Vance's ranch from his weak-willed partner DAN AVERY. Belden promises to send only 2,000 head of cattle onto Vance's range, and Vance agrees to that, partly because of his love for Belden's daughter KATE. But, as this concluding installment opens, Vance sees more of Belden's cattle coming. He is sure Belden and Kate—who had offered her love in return for peace with her father—have betrayed him. Furious, Vance rides to dynamite the pass through which Belden's cattle are approaching.

CONCLUSION

VANCE worked with frantic haste, knowing it was but a makeshift job but having neither the time nor the skill to do better. He packed the entire case of explosives into a crevice in the rock wall at the narrowest part of Segundo Cut, hoping that the charge was properly set. As he affixed the fuse, he heard the ominous sounds of the approaching herd, the thunder of hoofs and clashing of horns intensified by the narrow confines of the pass. He began playing out the fuse, backing away from the dynamite-filled crevice.

Mario sat his horse nearby, an anxious look on his dusky face. Mario distrusted and feared explosives.

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Vance told him, "We'll give Belden a warning. You go tell him, *amigo,* then ride on through the Cut so that you're safe."

Mario went, eagerly.

Vance laid fifty feet of fuse, then relaxed. He would give Mario time to talk to Belden, let Belden have time to make his decision. He removed his hat, used his bandanna to wipe sweat from his brow. The sounds of the approaching herd grew louder. It was not being stopped and turned back. Taking a match from his pocket, he lit it with a thumbnail and touched off the fuse. It began a noisy sputtering, the burning powder eating swiftly along the thin strand.

He went to his horse, swung to the saddle, and turned west through the pass. Looking back, he saw cattle surge around a bend. There were no point riders. The Bell men were hazing them along from drag, taking no chances of being fired upon, as had happened the night they tried to spirit a herd through Rincon Cut.

He was near the end of the pass when the blast came. There was a tremendous clap of sound, and the rock wall slowly buckled. A dust cloud mushroomed. Splintered pieces of rock shot skyward. The wall collapsed now, with a great rumble of noise. Then the dust blotted out the entire scene. The racket of falling rock continued for some time, however, and Vance had no doubt that the pass was being sealed.

It was done then, and Vance, feeling no real satisfaction, rode from the pass and down onto Spur range, asking himself, what next? Nothing was really settled.

Mario rode in at nightfall. Vance had a horse rigged with a pack saddle and was loading it with provisions and camp gear. His dun stallion stood nearby with trailing reins. He had his blanket roll tied behind the cantle of its saddle.

Mario said, "We move out, eh?"

Vance nodded. "We move out," he said. "I've a hunch Belden won't take what I pulled on him today. He's likely to come after me with his whole crew. I don't intend to let him catch me napping. How did he take it when you told him I was about to dynamite the pass?"

"He was not there, Will," Mario said. "I told Matt Yarnell. He cursed me. I rode away fast, and did not wait to see what happened. I was almost to Bell's end of the pass when the dynamite went off." He regarded Vance worriedly. "Where will we go?"

"We'll set up a camp that will be hard to find."

They moved out ten minutes later, packing along several canteens filled with water. The water was important. They would have to set up a dry camp, no matter where they went. If Bell came onto Spur, the well at headquarters, and also Barquino Spring, would be barred to them. Water would be a problem for them while they were in hiding. Lack of it might, Vance realized, force him to quit Spur range. But he would come back. He would always come back, unless Bell managed to hunt him down.

They located their hideout camp in one of the dense brush thickets along the dry bed of Moreno Creek. They cooked their supper, then killed the fire so that its glare would not betray their whereabouts if John Belden sent his riders onto Spur. Mario turned in shortly after eating, but Vance, too full of anger to sleep, lounged against a rock and puffed on a cigarette. He silently damned John Belden for not being a man of his word—for not being willing to admit that he had no right to take over Spur Ranch.

Tomorrow Vance would attempt to block the other two passes through the Frios, if he could elude the Bell riders. He wasn't too hopeful that he would succeed. Belden would expect him to make such an attempt, and would almost certainly post a couple of men with Winchesters in each of the remaining passes. Failing to block them, there would be that last resort—settling the affair with a gun, and killing John Belden.

It seemed to Vance that it must come to that. There would never be peace of mind, never any security, for him so long as Belden was alive. How to get to the man would be a problem. Two dozen armed riders stood between him and Bell's owner, and every one of them would surely open fire on him at night.

Vance turned in finally, and slept restlessly. In the morning, after eating breakfast

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with Mario, he saddled the dun and rode from the tangled mesquite thickets. It promised to be another hot, dry day. The sun was hardly above the jagged crests of the Frios, but already it scorched the land.

A few cotton-white clouds hung motionless in a deep blue sky. Later, as the sun climbed, the sky would lose its rich color and become brassy to the eye. Wind blew in strong gusts, sweeping along clouds of gritty dust from the barren flats west of the Moreno. The wind itself was oven hot.

Vance rode watchfully, holding the dun to a walk. He saw scattered cattle in the distance, but no horsemen. Coming finally to a rocky rise southwest of Spur headquarters, he reined in atop it and peered into the heat haze shimmering about the buildings. The Bell riders were there.

No, not Bell. Too many men jammed Spur ranchyard, far more men than John Belden had in his crew, and far too many animals. Now about half the band moved out and headed northeast, toward Estrella, with a dozen pack mules. It was Durango.

Vance swore aloud. He'd anticipated one brand of trouble and gotten another. He'd known that Durango would come to avenge Aragon's death, but he hadn't expected him so soon. It surprised him also that Durango would be sending his pack mules to Estrella for provisions, so short a time after his last deal with George Worden. Then, remembering the cases of rifles in Worden's back room, Vance decided that he knew why the pack string was again on its way to Estrella.

THE distance was too great for Vance to tell if Durango led the outfit moving out from Spur headquarters, or had remained with the men who were still there. Then, remembering his promise to Limpy, Vance turned back toward Moreno Creek. He met Mario midway, and saw his own uneasiness reflected on the *vaquero's* face as he told him about Durango.

"Ride to Estrella and tell Limpy that he's on his way," he said. "The bandits are traveling with pack mules, so you'll be able to beat them across Spur range if you make a run for it."

Mario nodded.

Vance said, "After you've talked to Limpy, drop from sight. Stay away from here, so you'll be safe."

Mario nodded again, then headed north at a gallop.

Vance turned back toward the rise overlooking his ranch buildings, and shortly saw three groups of horsemen, four in each group, leaving. Since each group headed in a different direction, Vance knew they were looking for him. He had no choice but to retreat to the brush.

Late in the afternoon, four riders approached within easy rifle range of the hideout camp. Vance watched them over the barrel of his rifle, from a prone position by the gnarled trunk of a mesquite tree, waiting for them to head directly toward him. However, they rode to the dry creek, at a point some distance north of his camp, and reined in there. After a smoke and some idle peering out across the sand flats beyond the Moreno, they turned north and soon were gone from his range of vision.

At dusk, Vance kindled a miserly fire in the sandy creek bottom, and cooked his evening meal. He scattered the fire as soon as the grub was ready, and kicked dirt over the embers. He finished eating before nightfall, and then, after a smoke, saddled up and rode from the thickets. Two hours later, reined in atop the rise overlooking his buildings, he saw a fire in the middle of the yard, and figures about it.

He eased his rifle from its boot and fired three quick shots. There was a wild scurrying of frightened bandits, and some loud yells. In a moment the bandits' guns opened up, firing at nothing. The racket of shots continued for perhaps five minutes. Vance waited in the quiet that followed, but no riders set out to hunt for him. He knew now that Durango was not at Spur. Had he been, there would have been a search made.

Vance dismounted, left his horse ground-hitched, and made himself as comfortable as possible among the rocks. He gave the bandits time to convince themselves that the danger was past; then he fired two more shots at the buildings. Again there was a scurrying of

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shadowy figures, loud yells, and another burst of shots.

Satisfied then that he'd given them reason to know that he hadn't left Spur, he reloaded his rifle and mounted his horse. He hoped to keep the bandits searching for him long enough for Limpy to get a message to the Rangers, and for the Rangers to reach the Big Bend. For his own future safety, Vance wanted Durango to fall into a Ranger trap.

It was midnight when Vance reached his camp. He'd just off-saddled his horse when the drumming of hoofs reached him. He slipped his rifle from its boot and crept into the deep brush. The oncoming horse slowed from a run to a walk.

Mario called, "Don't shoot, Will!"

Mario's horse was blowing and lathered. He began off-saddling it as soon as he dismounted. "I gave the message to Limpy," he said. "Then I went to visit a friend who lives at Estrella. In the afternoon Durango came with eighteen riders and the pack string. The *bandidos* went to Senor Worden's saloon and started drinking. Tonight there was trouble. Limpy came to my friend's house and gave me a message for you. When I started out, Durango and his men were loading their mules. By now they are on the way back to Spur."

"What's the message?"

"Limpy said to tell you that he sent word to the Rangers, but he does not know if they will get here in time. He said it was more important for you to know that Matt Yarnell no longer works for Bell Ranch, and has thrown in with Durango."

"Yarnell's left Bell? How come?"

Mario shrugged. "Who knows?" he said. "Anyway, Durango wanted to know where you and the Averys had gone, why nobody was at Spur. Yarnell was there and he told the *bandido* that Senor and Senora Avery were at Bell and that you must have gone into hiding. Then he said that he would help Durango hunt you down."

Vance said, "Well, that's to be expected. Yarnell hates my guts"

"There's more, Will," Mario said. "Limpy said that Durango and Senor Worden are no longer friends. There was trouble between them. The *rurales* ambushed Durango when he got back to Mexico from his other trip and he lost all his supplies as well as some of his men. This trip he wanted guns as well as provisions, but he did not have money enough. He wanted to pay the next time he came to Texas, after he went raiding, but Senor Worden turned him down. Tonight Durango got drunk and gun-whipped him. He not only took the guns, but robbed Senor Worden's safe."

"Well, you can't deal with the Devil," Vance said. "I found that out from John Belden, and now Worden's learned it from Durango."

"What will you do now, Will?"

"Play hide-and-seek with that crowd," Vance said. "Bait Durango into hanging around Spur until the Rangers get here."

"But there is Yarnell. He knows this range. He will know where to look for you. It is too risky."

Vance nodded, but he said, "Mario, I'm not letting anybody scare me off Spur. Let's turn in."

VANCE slept lightly, waking often to listen for sounds of riders seeking the hideout camp. He heard none, and in the morning saw none near the brush thickets. They ate breakfast at dawn, and at sunup saddled and rode out. Mario headed back toward Estrella where he would be safe, on Vance's urging. Vance rode toward Spur headquarters, and finally looked down upon the buildings from the rocky rise to the southwest of them.

There was a great deal of activity in the ranchyard. Durango had just returned from Estrella with his laden pack mules. They were being relieved of their burdens, and horses were being stripped of saddles. Several cookfires had been kindled, and men were gathered about each of them to eat breakfast. If Matt Yarnell were down there, Vance was unable from that distance to identify him.

He remained on the rise for an hour. Then, seeing a number of the bandits saddling mounts, he got onto his dun and headed toward Moreno Creek. Twice during the day, riders approached the hideout camp but failed

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to spot it. Matt Yarnell led the second bunch, but Durango did not ride with him. Yarnell and his half-dozen ragtag followers turned north before reaching the thickets, soon disappearing. Vance could relax temporarily.

Late that afternoon he gave his horses—the dun he rode and the sorrel which had served as a pack animal—the last of the water from the canteens. He himself drank the leftover breakfast coffee. That night he set out for Barquino Springs.

He rode slowly, halting often to watch and listen for other riders. He swung far north of Spur headquarters. Coming finally to Barquino Spring, he found the tank crowded with Spur and Bell cattle. He circled the waterhole at a distance, gun in hand. Then, convinced that no bandits were posted there, he rode in among the rocks.

He let the dun drink at the small pool close to the source of the spring, then filled the canteens. He felt safe enough to linger for a smoke, and safe enough, when he rode out later, to venture close to his buildings. Walking the dun, he approached within perhaps two hundred yards of them.

The buildings were dark, but a fire blazed in the middle of the yard, and there was some activity there. Shortly afterward, a long file of riders set out from yard. He counted the shadowy figures thirty-two of them, each of the last two leading a pack mule. They headed in the direction from which he'd come, toward Braquino Spring.

He puzzled over these night riders, and the only conclusion he could draw was that they were to fine-comb the Frio Hilles for him when daylight came. He felt a wry satisfaction in that, for the longer Durango remained at Spur the greater was the chance that the Rangers would arrive in time to take a hand in the situation.

There were still some men at Spur headquarters, however, and they would probably search in another direction tomorrow. Perhaps they would come into the Moreno Creek thickets to manhunt him. He rode back to

[Turn page]

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the hideout camp to get some sleep before the grim game of hide-and-seek started up again.

There was no real sunrise the next morning. A dust storm swept across the Big Bend, and the land lay shrouded by a gray haze that threatened to thicken into a suffocating blackness. Vance awoke with a feeling that something was wrong, something aside from the gale-driven dust. By the time he'd eaten breakfast, he knew what it was. Those riders were going to Bell, not into the Frios!

He blamed himself for not having suspected that when he saw the thirty-odd horse-men leave Spur headquarters in the middle of the night. He'd known from Mario that Matt Yarnell had told Durango about the Averys being at Bell Ranch. And Durango wanted them—Claire, at least—as much or even more than he wanted revenge on Vance.

The bandit's gun-whipping and robbing George Worden were proof that this was to be Durango's last trip into the Big Bend. So he would make a final attempt to lure the Avery's into Mexico, and he had taken enough men with him to make sure that no one at Bell could interfere with him. He might even intend to take the Averys away by force.

Durango would already be at Bell, and by now, Vance thought with genuine alarm, anything could be happening there—an actual bandit raid, killing and looting, rape. Durango could be making his last foray into the Big Bend a bloody one.

Vance forgot about breakfast. He ignored the fact that there were still some of Durango's *pistoleros* on Spur—led by Matt Yarnell, perhaps—who might even now be gunning for him. He saddled up, swung onto the dun, and rode from the brush and across the dust-smudged range. It was far too late to warn the people at Bell, but he hoped that in some way he might still help them. Not John Belden, of course. He cared not at all what might happen to Bell's owner. But he did care about the others—Kate, the Averys, the wives and children of the Bell *vaqueros*.

He'd traveled less than a mile when two riders appeared directly ahead. He swerved at once, but he had been seen. One rider shouted something, and the shout was echoed by the blast of a shot. The next moment three more riders loomed through a dust cloud and raced to head Vance off. He was forced to swing about and flee back toward the brush.

Two more shots racketed; then the five held their fire and tried to run him down. He lengthened his lead slightly during the run to the thickets, and had some hope that he would lose them in the brush. The hope soon faded, for two of the five swung south and entered the mesquite directly across his route. Turning the dun, he headed into the dry creek and swung north along its sandy bottom. This brought him under the guns of two other riders and they immediately opened fire.

He pulled the dun to a rearing halt, dropped from the saddle with his Winchester. He fired twice at the sombreroed figures, and they wheeled away in quick flight. Now the two who'd gone into the mesquite appeared, a hundred yards back along the creek. He exchanged shots with them, dropping one from his horse and turning the other back into the brush.

Matt Yarnell must have been having trouble keeping the bandits on the scent, for he continued a bitter cursing as he rode the thickets. Vance climbed from the arroyo, heading across the sandy wastes to the west. He looked back and four riders were coming after him, one leading the others by twenty yards. That one was Matt Yarnell.

HERE on the sand flats the storm was at its worst, with the swirling dust so thick at times that Vance was shrouded completely. He took advantage of this cover and changed directions frequently in an attempt to lose his pursuers. With someone less tenacious and embittered than Matt Yarnell, he might have made good his escape. Yarnell would not be shaken. And the others followed Yarnell. They drove Vance deeper into the *malpais*, mile after mile.

The dust made breathing difficult, and in too short a time the big *bayo tigre* grew winded. Its stride began to falter. Vance was by then far across the sand flats. He'd increased his lead, but still was unable to throw off the pursuit. He slowed the dun, knowing that the mounts of the men following him

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must also be tiring. Indeed, when he looked back he saw that one of the bandits had fallen behind.

The others, Yarnell included, could not force their mounts faster than an easy trot. They had to be content merely to keep their quarry in sight. They fired an occasional shot, and in that manner forced Vance on across the wasteland hour after hour. Vance, harried though he himself was, felt a sense of dread about what might be happening at Bell Ranch.

At mid-afternoon the gale increased its fury and the dust was so dense that at times he thought it might be possible to back-track and elude the man-hunters. He waited until a thick cloud rolled past him, then turned back toward Moreno Creek. He ran the dun again, for the first time in a couple of hours. For a brief interval, he believed that he might make it. Then the dust thinned abruptly, and he saw Yarnell and one of the bandits directly ahead.

He was taken by surprise, but not to such a degree as the other two riders were. Pulling the dun to a rearing stop, Vance dropped from the saddle and swung his Winchester to his shoulder. He heard the bandit's alarmed yell and Yarnell's shouted curse. Yarnell raked his mount with his spurs and drove it straight at Vance, firing his six-shooter.

His first shot went wild, and Vance too missed. Yarnell fired again as Vance jacked another cartridge into the rifle's chamber, and again his slug went wild. Vance tried to bead the rider, but Yarnell was too close and coming too fast. Jumping aside to avoid being run down, Vance tripped and fell. A slug from Yarnell's gun struck the ground within inches of his face. He rose to a kneeling position, catching Yarnell in his sights as the man whirled his horse about and came at him again.

He saw Yarnell's gun level on him, saw too the wicked look of hatred on the man's heavy face. Then, as Yarnell fired once more, Vance drove his shot home. Yarnell jerked violently in the saddle but managed to remain erect. Vance threw himself aside and rolled frantically to escape the running horse.

[*Turn page*]

To The Man With

HERNIA

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He expected Yarnell or the Mexican to fire on him, but no shot came.

When he picked himself up, he saw that the bandit was in wild flight and that Yarnell's horse was still running, with empty stirrups flapping. Yarnell lay fifty feet away. And in death, he had finally lost his black scowl. Dust rolled up, obscuring the dead man. Vance, turning away, thought, what was the sense of it, Matt?

Night came early, sooty black and violent. For Will Vance, well onto Bell range now, the world was all wind and dust and anxiety. He was afraid of what he would find at Bell headquarters. He rode at a walk, revolver in hand, peering into the murky darkness for the glow of lighted windows. He saw no lights, but suddenly an adobe building loomed directly before him. Like a blind man, he'd stumbled upon the place he sought.

The instant he saw the building, a voice shouted, "There's somebody!"

He threw himself from the saddle and dropped flat to the ground. It was none too soon. There was a spurt of powder flame and the blast of the shot.

He called, "Hold it!"

"Name yourself!"

"Will Vance."

A man stepped out from the corner of the building, covering Vance with his revolver. Two *vaqueros* armed with rifles followed this man whom Vance, now rising, recognized as Chris Hogan.

Hogan's dislike of Vance was in his voice. "What are you up to, anyway?"

"I want to see John Belden."

"How'd you get here?"

"I rode in. How else?"

"How'd you get past the Durango crowd? This place is ringed with guns."

Vance said that he'd got past the bandits by dumb luck, then asked again for John Belden. He was told to go to the main house. He had his bearings now. This building was the crew's bunkhouse. The little adobes in which the *vaqueros* with families lived were to the left, and the owner's big house was fifty yards to the right.

Vance headed toward the ranchhouse, feeling his way through the dusty blackness. Not a light showed anywhere. Shadowy figures with rifles lurked in the darkness, two of them on the gallery of the ranchhouse. Wind howled about the buildings. Fear had a viselike grip on Bell headquarters; Vance could feel it in the man standing guard.

He was passed by the men on the gallery, and he entered the house without knocking. A pencil of lamplight showed beneath the door of Belden's office. Vance crossed the hallway, opened the door, and stepped inside.

An Indian blanket was fixed over the window to keep the light from being a target for Durango's men. Dan and Claire Avery were with Belden, seated together on a sofa. Dan looked sickly and frightened; Claire was expressionless, with a faraway look in her eyes, apparently untouched by the fear that gripped everyone else at Bell.

Brazos Long and an elderly *vaqeuro* were also in the room, standing before their boss's desk. Vance missed Kate; it seemed to him that she should be here with the others. Belden heaved from his chair at sight of Vance, and came from behind the desk. His bearded face was contorted with rage and hatred. His right arm in the sling, he wore his gun for a left-hand draw. With a muttered oath he fumbled the gun from its holster.

VANCE caught him by the wrist and wrenched the gun away from him. He said, "Don't blame me for sending Durango here, old man. Blame Matt Yarnell. He was at Estrella yesterday and told that *bandido* about the Averys being here."

He stepped back, throwing Belden's gun onto a chair. Belden still stared at him with hate-filled eyes, but he was more calm now.

Vance said, "Why did Yarnell quit you?"

"I fired him," Belden said, "for disobeying orders. I told him to make sure you weren't in the Cut rigging some sort of stunt. He didn't. He drove the herd through without making sure. He didn't even turn it back when your man warned him. You know how many cattle it cost me when you dynamited that pass?"

Vance ignored the question. He said, "Well, you fired Matt and turned him into a lobo wolf. He told Durango the Averys were here

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and he tried to help Durango's *pistoleros* find me—and now he's dead. He tried to even the score with you for firing him, and he tried to work off his grudge against me. But like always, you're the joker behind the grief. How bad are things here?"

"How bad?" Belden said, and swore. "That's a fool question. That bandit has enough men to take this place apart. We can put up a fight, sure. But we haven't a chance of winning one. So there's not going to be any fight. We're coming to terms with Durango."

"What terms?"

"I'm giving him what he wants—five thousand dollars and the Averys."

"You can't do it. You can't hand these people over to him."

"I can't? With my daughter in Durango's hands, you tell me I can't do it?"

"Kate?" Vance said, not wanting to believe this. "How did it happen?"

Belden tried to explain, but he choked up. He could be conscienceless in dealing with others, but the iron hardness had gone out of him now that his daughter was in danger. Seeing that his boss could not speak, old Brazos Long talked up.

Kate had ridden over to Coyote Arroyo late yesterday, according to Brazos. She'd been peeved at her father for his breaking his word to Vance. She'd quarreled with him and then, still angry, rode to Coyote Arroyo to see Mrs. Forsythe, with whom she was friendly. She had stayed overnight, and Durango's men had caught her on her way home today.

Vance said, "So he's holding her hostage?"

Brazos nodded. "He's threatened to give her to his men," he said. "The bandits showed up early this morning. Esteban here—" he nodded toward the old *vaquero*—"rode out for the remuda and spotted them. They grabbed him, and Durango told him what he wanted and sent him in to give the terms to the boss. They didn't have Kate then. They didn't get her until late this afternoon. The boss was going to make a fight of it until we got word from Durango about Kate."

[*Turn page*]

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"And now?"

"Now Esteban is going out to dicker with Durango," Brazos said.

Vance stared at Belden. "Dicker how?" he demanded. "With an offer to send the Averys out?" He shook his head. "Nothing doing. I've just come to realize that Kate means everything to me, like she does to you. But I'm not sending Avery to his death, and his wife to nobody knows what, to buy Kate's freedom. There's got to be another way." He looked at the *vaquero*. "Where were you going to meet Durango?"

"There is a waterhole a half mile to the north," Esteban said, "with just a little water in it. Durango has set up his camp there. When they took me to him, there were three of his men with him."

"Only three?"

"*Si.*"

"And the senorita would be held there, you think?"

Esteban nodded. "Durango sent word that I am to come out with the money and Senor and Senora Avery, and then his men would bring Senorita Belden to me."

Belden said, "Vance, you're not pulling some loco stunt that will endanger my daughter. I'm doing it my way." He gestured at Brazos and Esteban. "Throw down on him, you two. Disarm him."

Vance laid his hand on his gun before either of the Bell men could draw on him. They showed no inclination to do as Belden had ordered, anyway.

Brazos went so far as to say, "Take it easy, boss. You've never won a hand against this man yet. If he's got something in mind, maybe he's man enough to pull it off. One thing sure, he wouldn't do anything that would get Kate harmed."

Vance said, "I'll gamble my life for her, Belden. If I lose, you'll be in the clear to get Kate away from Durango any way you please." He backed to the door, his hand still on his gun. He said to Brazos, "I came in past Durango's men. I should be able to get out past them. Give me ten minutes, then start some shooting. Maybe it will draw Durango and one or two of the others away from the waterhole. The fewer I have to deal with the better chance I'll have of getting Kate away from them."

He went out, closing the door behind him. As he crossed the dark hallway, he heard an angry outburst from John Belden. He made his way back to the bunkhouse, located his horse, and slipped his rifle from its saddle boot.

Hogan was still there, and he said, "What do you think you're doing, anyway?"

"What somebody else should have done long before now," Vance told him. "I'm going after the girl."

"You'll get your head blown off, you crazy galoot."

"Maybe I will," Vance said, and moved out into bandit-infested stormy blackness on foot.

He'd covered perhaps a hundred yards when he collided with a man. His own startled grunt was echoed by a Spanish oath. He lashed out with his rifle, and felt the jar as the stock found the man. He struck again, dropping the bandit. He leapt over the crumpled figure and was tripped by a second man who was bedded down there.

He landed heavily, face down. Heaving over onto his back, he saw the man rising with a gun in his hand. Vance made a wild swing with his rifle, hitting the bandit's arm an instant before the revolver roared. He jumped up, swung the Winchester like a club, and downed the man. A shout lifted from some distance away as Vance began to run. It was lost in the howl of the wind.

He ran blindly for several minutes, then stopped to listen. He heard no sounds of pursuit, but shortly there was a flurry of shots back at the Bell buildings. A brief silence followed the shooting, then the guns started racketing once more. He supposed that old Brazos was responsible for the gunfire.

Vance tried to get his bearings. Due to the storm, he had neither stars nor landmarks by which to gauge directions. He had only instinct to tell him which was north, and he began to fear, as he started out again, that he might not be able to locate the waterhole.

MINUTES later, something rushed at him out of the darkness. He threw himself to the ground, and a horseman raced past so close that a clod of dirt,

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thrown up by a hoof, struck his face. He felt sure that the rider had come from the waterhole, and was on his way to the besieged ranch headquarters because of the shooting there. For all Vance knew, it could have been Durango himself. At any rate, he was certain of his direction now, and went on at a run.

He would have blundered past the waterhole, but for the horses. The rattle of a bit chain reached him, halted him. He peered about and saw the horse ten feet to his right. A moment later he made out the shapes of three more animals. All stood dejectedly, heads drooping almost to the ground.

He circled them, moving warily. He came to a clump of brush, crept through it, reached some boulders. Beyond the rocks the ground fell away sharply, and he knew that he'd found the hollow in which the waterhole was located.

At that moment he was startled by the hacking of a man clearing his throat of dust. Peering about, he saw the man on the same level with himself but about fifty feet away, an obscure shadow. He took it for granted that this man was a sentry.

Below, in the hollow, Vance saw now the cherry-red glow of a cigarette or cigar. Two men were down there, sitting with their backs against a boulder. Strain his eyes as he would, he saw nothing of Kate. That worried him until he remembered that there were only three men, but four horses. One of the horses must be Kate's. Vance crouched there, watching the guard and trying to decide his mode of attack. His decision was to ignore the guard for the time being. He began a stealthy descent into the hollow.

He was midway down the bank when one of the men below suddenly called, *"Patron,* is that you?"

From above came the voice of Durango, demanding in Spanish, "What goes on, fools? It is certainly I!"

Vance had only time enough to realize that he'd erred in mistaking the man on the rim for a sentry. There was nothing he could do about it now, for one of the men below had cat's eyes and cried out, *"El Tejano!"*

[*Turn page*]

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Both leapt up, one opening fire immediately. Vance fired at the muzzle flash of the bandit's weapon, and heard a scream that told him he'd found his mark. He traded shots with the other man, cutting him down with his third slug. Durango's gun opened up now, and Vance, realizing that he was an easy target, threw himself from the bank and plummeted downward.

He landed heavily ten feet below, his knees buckling. He fell onto his left side, heaved over onto his back, and from that awkward position began shooting at Durango's dim figure as fast as he could work lever and trigger. The powder flashes of his own weapon blinded him momentarily, but he fired until the Winchester was empty.

Then, throwing the rifle aside, he grabbed for his revolver and came to his feet. His vision cleared, but he still had no target. Durango was gone from the rim, shot down or in flight.

Vance called to Kate, and heard her quick reply. "I'm here, Will, in the rocks."

Another shot crashed from above, telling him that Durango was still near and still able to fight. He began climbing the bank, peering about for the man. Once out of the hollow, he made his way through the rocks and the brush thicket. He had a glimpse of a movement over near the horses, fired, drew an answering shot.

He saw Durango now, fired at him again, then lost sight of him. He waited there for perhaps ten minutes, thinking that the bandit *jefe* would try again to get to the horses. Then, afraid that he would go to Kate and make use of her as a hostage again, Vance pulled the picket pins holding the animals, and led the four of them down into the hollow.

He found Kate lying at the far side of it, beside a rock, bound hand and foot. He cuts her bonds with his pocketknife. Taking her into his arms seemed the natural thing to do. She clung to him, trembling violently.

The threat of Durango was still real and, once Kate had herself under control, Vance went to retrieve his rifle. He reloaded it, then prowled the rim of the hollow and the darkness beyond. Seeing nothing of the bandit *jefe*, he returned to Kate. He knew now that what he'd told her father was true; this girl was everything to him, more important even than Spur Ranch. And he did not need to wonder how she felt toward him. She had come willingly, eagerly, into the circle of his arms.

He was aware of a change in the night. There was a calm, a quiet. The storm had blown itself out. The wind no longer howled. The racket of gunfire in the distant had ceased. It was as though his finding Kate had signaled the end of the night's fury.

But it wasn't over, not with Durango either hiding nearby or on his way to rejoin his men. He must get Kate away from this place. He took her to the horses, helped her mount hers, and told her to ride back to the Forsythe ranch.

"You'll be safe there," he said, standing beside her.

She was reluctant to leave him. "But you?"

He thought about what was between them, and he said, "You don't need to be told how I feel about you. What I'd better tell you is that I haven't changed. I'm still the same tough-hand, and I'll always be that. I won't ever back down to your father. I'll fight him until one or the other of us is a goner. Do you understand?"

"I know what you're like, Will."

"There's another thing. I had a fall-out with George Worden. I roughed him up. I can't help making enemies, it seems."

"Whatever you did to George, you probably had a good reason for it."

"The main reason for our fight was that he believes I've taken you away from him."

KATE shook her head. "You haven't. He never had any real claim on me. He asked if he could call on me, and I said that he could. That was all the encouragement I ever gave him. I saw through George from the start. I knew that the prospect of marrying Bell Ranch was as attractive as marrying me, to him." She smiled down at Vance. "You remember the day you came to Estrella all duded up and I took a puff on your cigar?"

"I remember."

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"That was the day I decided that George could never be the man for me."

"I didn't know."

"I didn't want to admit it to myself," she said, "but it grew on me. Even when I thought I hated you, I realized that you were the man I wanted." She touched his shoulder. "It wasn't a real hate, Will."

"It will be if I have to go on fighting your father."

"No. Because I know he's wrong."

Vance started to say that John Belden's being wrong didn't change the fact that he was her father, but he was interrupted by a drumming of hoofs in the distance.

He said, "That will be Durango. It's time to ride. Can you find your way?"

The dust was settling. They could see the star-sprinkled sky. Kate nodded and said, "Don't take chances, Will. Don't be reckless. For my sake, don't!"

He gave her his word on that, and watched her ride from the hollow and head north at a lope. He turned to one of the Mexican horses, swung to the hard saddle. He rode from the south end of the hollow, his rifle held ready. It was possible to see for some distance now, and he made out three riders heading toward him.

One called, "Vance?"

It was Old Brazos Long. John Belden and the *vaquero* named Esteban were with Brazos.

Vance said, "Kate is safe, Belden. She's on her way back to the Forsythe place." There was an audible sigh of relief from Belden. "What happened at headquarters?"

Brazos said, "We did as you asked, opened fire on the bandits. We had more luck than we hoped for, picking off two of them right away and then getting three more a couple of minutes later. We pushed our luck and charged out at them. A half dozen jumped on their horses and hightailed it. After that it was easy. We kept after the others until they lost their nerve. They're on their way back to Mexico. Did you get Durango?"

Vance shook his head. "He didn't hold still long enough. But he's afoot and alone, and I will get him."

[*Turn page*]

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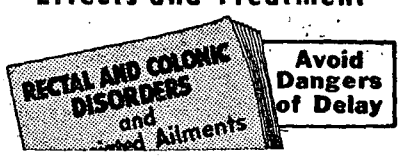

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There was still not a word from Bell's owner. He sagged in the saddle, shoulders bowed and bearded chin on chest. It seemed to Vance that Belden had aged years in this one night; rather, in the past hour when fear for his daughter had rusted away the iron core of his nature. He would never again be the high and mighty John Belden with the strength of will to ride roughshod over his fellow men. But Vance found no pity in his heart for him.

Brazos said, "Let's move along. The sooner we hunt that *bandido* down the better."

"No. Take Belden, you and Esteban, and go after Kate."

"We're willing to help you against Durango," Brazos said. "You know that."

"I want no help," Vance said, turning away. "He's mine, mine alone."

Riding the Mexican horse, his rifle across the saddle, Vance rode one way and another across Bell range. It was nearly two hours before he caught a glimpse of his quarry. With the storm over, the night was clear, and a full moon bathed the range with its cold, clear light. Durango was a bulky, ungainly figure topping a rise of ground, halting there upon hearing the beat of hoofs.

He called, "Vance?"

Vance saw the bandit's rifle come up. He jerked the Mexican horse to a stop and called, "Who else, *bandido?* Did you expect a friend?"

There was a moment of silence. Then Durango said, "We could be friends, *senor.* There is no real need for you and me to try to kill each other."

"Now it's you who's the beggar, *bandido.*"

"Not that, *amigo.* Like you, I am not able to beg. But I can be a trader. I have money." He took something from his pocket and threw it to the ground. Vance heard the jingle of coins. Durango went on, "That is for the horse, Senor Vance; enough money to buy a hundred horses."

"Money stolen from George Worden's safe, maybe?"

"Money is money, no matter where it comes from."

"You and Worden think alike, *bandido.* I'll return the money to him."

"And the horse?"

Vance dropped from the saddle and moved away from the animal. "There it is," he said. "It will take you to Mexico. Come and get it." He added, "You made your mistake the day you first set foot on Spur range, *bandido.* And you can't trade your way out of such a mistake. Come and get the horse. I'll tie your rotten carcass across the saddle, and that's how you'll go back to Mexico!"

Durango swore, swung his rifle up, and fired a hasty shot. Vance threw himself to the ground. There was no cover, not even any grass to hide in on this drought-blighted range. Durango's second shot struck alongside Vance, his third directly in front of him. Vance was taking careful aim all this while, and now squeezed out his shot and saw the bulky figure go down. He started to rise, but Durango, not only alive but apparently unharmed, drove another slug at him. It came so close that Vance flinched. He rolled over twice, throwing off the bandit's aim, then scrambled to the ground-hitched horse.

"Why don't you shoot now, *bandido?*" he shouted. "Afraid you'll hit the horse? What is a single horse? How many horses have you stolen in your time, anyway? For that matter, how many women have you stolen, and how many men have you murdered?"

Neither shot nor angry retort came from the rise. Durango had moved down its far side. Vance took a short hold on the horse's reins and, walking beside the animal, began flanking the ground swell. When east of the rise, he stopped and tied back the horse's reins. With a yell and a slap across the rump, he started the animal running.

"There goes your mount, Durango!" he called. "When morning comes, the whole Bell crew will be gunning for you. That horse is your last hope, but you can still catch it!"

There was the flash and crack of a shot from the gully into which Durango had crawled. An instant later the man himself, with a bellow of rage, rose and rushed at Vance with drawn revolver. He fired wildly, a man gone barserk. Vance deliberately lifted his rifle and drove his shot home. Durango staggered and then, under the impact of another slug, went to his hand and knees. Still he tried to bring his gun to bear. Vance fired

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once more, and Jose did not move again.

IT WAS another day.

Will Vance returned from Valido, from seeing the Averys off on the stage that would take them to the railroad and a train East. He'd parted with them on fairly friendly terms, but if they were leaving the Big Bend any the wiser he did not know. He felt that they were changed to a degree—Dan more domineering in manner and Claire more submissive. It wasn't possible, Vance believed, for anyone to come into this harsh, primitive country and not be changed.

He found Kate at Spur headquarters. She had estimated accurately the number of days it would take him to make the trip. She stood in the shade at the side of the bunkhouse, talking to Mario. He halted his team by the barn and climbed from the buckboard.

He was wearing his gray broadcloth suit and his good hat and boots. Kate said, as she had said once before, "Sort of duded up, aren't you?"

He answered as before. "A little." Then he added, "I figured to come calling on you this evening, it being the man's part to do the courting. But since you're here. . . ."

Kate laughed. "I'd rather it be a proper courting," she said. "Anyway, I didn't ride over to court you. I came to prime you, Will. Bell has to have a new foreman. You'll be offered the job. When that happens, you ask for a partnership in Bell."

"And have John Belden take a gun to me?"

Kate shook her head gravely. "Not any more. Not ever again. The fire and brimstone have gone out of him. You'll ask?"

"I'll do whatever you want, Kate."

"Good," she said, turning to her horse. "Both my father and I will expect you."

"Why rush off?"

She swung to the saddle and said, "I really want it to be a proper courting." She kneed her mount into motion. "Come early."

He stood looking after her, telling himself that it would be a proper courting but not a long one. In certain affairs, patience could be a foolish thing.

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WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

GIRL OF PISCES
FEB. 20—MAR. 20

RULED by Neptune, with the sign of the three-pronged spear, or Poseidon, the zodiacal configuration known as Pisces has witnessed from the heavens many interesting events. The land now known as Nebraska became a State of the Union under this sign—on March 1, 1867. Two other states also celebrate their birthdays under the auspices of Pisces: Vermont (March 4, 1791) and Ohio (March 1, 1803.) People from this Eastern and mid-Western State were prominent among the colonizers of Nebraska, which was destined to share their birthday.

The girl born under the sign of Pisces is primarily motivated by a desire to help others, and often dedicates her life to her children, to teaching, to nursing. She does not know selfishness, and is happiest when helping others. She is highly imaginative, sensitive, inclined to quietness of manner and speech. She has a pronounced artistic bent and a deep sense of harmony. These traits show in her home as well as in her life.

Pisces girls are happiest with men of sensitivity. Coarseness of manner or taste offend girls of this sign, and they should consider this innate quality while choosing a mate.

They have a deep feeling for beauty, rhythm, harmony and peace. A rowdy life is not the normal one for a girl whose astrological sign is that of the depth of the sea. Discord drives her within herself, where the planet Neptune gives her solace and an odd psychic knowledge about other people.

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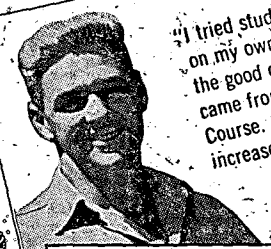

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